

**GUY S.
STANTON III**



**THE
PROVERBIAL
WAR**

THE
PROVERBIAL
WAR

Book Two
of
Water Wars

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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*“Speak the Truth,
Keep the Faith,
Love the sinner,
Honor the Father,
Know the Son
Die to the World,
Resist the deceiver,
Fight the Proverbial War.*

Guy S. Stanton III

Chapter One

Hatchet Girl

There was a nervous quality to the atmosphere to be felt present within the boardroom. Various members of the board sat in plushly cushioned leather armchairs talking in small groups of two or three, as others held beverages of significant alcoholic force from which they sipped in solitary file throughout the room. They either stared at each other in morose fashion or stared out the sheer glass walls to the high-rise cityscape beyond.

Change was in the air and it wasn't likely to be good in their case or the company that they had all helped build. The company had just suffered through a hostile takeover and in lieu of a better way of putting it, they were all waiting around to see what the new company order would be and whose heads would roll.

Their new overlord was due to arrive at any moment and if the past was anything to judge by, the futures of the gathered board members was practically a hand-delivered reality to the unemployed soup and bread lines. These were unsteady times and jobs were hard to find almost everywhere one looked. Unless you happened to be in a niche market for a desired trade, one could expect a long wait to find a job that

approached anywhere near the significance of the ones they all had at the present.

The Chairman of the board stood with his hands held behind his back, as he morosely stared out the glass pane of the boardroom's exterior wall. There would be no alcohol for him. He'd face his fate head on.

Grimly he acknowledged that many couldn't afford to be so cavalier in their approach to being suddenly unemployed. That said, his concern still wasn't for the other executives within the boardroom.

If they hadn't had the good sense to lay enough money away to get by the folly, of their soon-to-be terminations,

was on them. The people the Chairman worried about were the workers, in short the real people, who had made the company the success that it was.

In any corporate restructuring, layoffs were to be expected, but this was different. Panolic International Investments and Enterprises had been corporate raided for only one purpose, which was to be systematically destroyed by a very powerful and vain woman, Francesca Marelli.

Her former husband, Steve Sampson, had been in large degree the reason behind Panolic's rousing success in a downturned economy. Panolic was a solid company with sound investment strategies. The only problem was that they hadn't monitored where all the stocks were going well enough in order

to avoid this monopolizing takeover.

This entire corporate takeover was nothing more than a petty revenge spat between former lovers. It had been blown way out of proportion and now it was going to add hardship to the lives of many.

Steve Sampson stepped up next to the Chairman and stared out at the busy actions of a city taking place all around them.

“I’m sorry Jim, that it came to this. I never imagined that she was capable of anything like what’s happening. I knew she hated me, but this!” Steve exclaimed with a bitter shake of his head.

The Chairman, Jim Swanson, glanced

from the window to Steve, the intended target of the entire corporate attack and said, “Well you know what the good book says Steve, ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned’”.

Steve nodded still staring vacantly out the window, “It’s the truth let me tell you!”

Jim shook his head, “Quite frankly I’m surprised at the level of her quest for revenge too. She stands to lose a fortune as a result of this takeover of Panolic and its subsequent liquidation. I know Francesca’s a shrewd businesswoman and I find it hard to see why she would make such a move for the sake of revenge. She could have had you bumped off a lot cheaper than to go to all the capital and strategic planning that brought this day about.”

Steve gave a sad smile, “It’s not enough to kill me Jim. She wants to tear my life apart and the best way to do that is with the business that I built up with the loving attention of a father. I have no doubt that I will be bumped off in some perceived accidental way following the demise of the company. I never realized what a monster I had married until it was too late.” He said, as his voice trailed off in a lamenting tone that expressed deep remorse.

Jim patted Steve’s shoulder, “Happens to the best of us. In your case it couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

“If only the divorce hadn’t been so ugly.” Steve said almost to himself.

Jim smacked Steve on the back somewhat roughly, “Now don’t go

blaming yourself for that! She's the one who brought the divorce forward. She intended to take you for everything you were worth completely unjustified! You had no choice but to bring forward the evidence of her affairs and scandalous parties."

Steve shook his head negatively and said, "If I'd just let her have all the money none of this would be happening. More importantly thousands of people would still have a good job when they woke up tomorrow. No, I should've just let it all go and started over instead of defending my pride like I did!"

Jim was about to protest more in defense of his friend when all conversation within the boardroom ceased as the double doors opened to reveal the glowing eyed predatory gaze

of Francesca Marelli, Steve's former wife. She was followed into the boardroom by just one attendant, one of her legal eagle hatchet girls.

I looked coolly through my eyelashes at the residents of the boardroom. They as a whole reminded one of a herd of scared bunnies, as they fidgeted and ducked their heads away from our gazes at our approach into the boardroom. Two exceptions to the flight mentality were Jim Swanson and Steve Sampson. They were the only ones that showed fight instead of flight.

In fact Jim Swanson looked positively belligerent. I admired his strength, but there was nothing he could do to stop the

inevitable, as I had dotted all the 'I's' and crossed all the 't's' too well for there to be any going back. Panolic International had fallen like a mortally wounded beast before my employer, Francesca Marelli, and now it lay helpless to avoid the killing stroke.

I'd done my job successfully and kept my head above water. That was more than could be said for those within the room. Heads were about to roll and my employer was enjoying every moment of my carefully plotted out demise of the once highly successful investment company, whose offshoots employed thousands upon thousands of people.

It gave me no pleasure to know that primarily through my efforts so many were about to lose their livelihoods. It had either been them or me and while I

didn't care overly much about whether my head went rolling anymore, there were personal repercussions that I did care about and that I wished to avoid at all costs.

Repercussions that people close to me would be hurt from, even heartbroken, if certain things were revealed. I couldn't afford for that to happen so here I was the principal author over the demise of a Fortune Five Hundred company.

"Won't you all have a seat." Francesca said gesturing in a gracious manner to the room of thirty odd executives.

Everyone had risen at our entrance and now with some furtive looks going on amongst themselves the majority in the room started to sit, but were interrupted by Francesca's false

gracious tone once more, “I told you to sit, but not where. You see the chairs now belong to me, but the building is leased. So feel free to sit on the floor.”

Those gathered within the room to hear their fate looked among themselves in startlement at the full faced insult that had just been delivered at point-blank range.

Francesca’s smile hadn’t dimmed any in its predatory import, as she watched on expectantly. Slowly half of those within the room dressed out in ten thousand dollars suits awkwardly got down to sit upon the floor, their faces red, as they avoided eye contact with everyone else in the room.

Francesca beamed down at them and leaned forward slightly towards one man to pat him on the head as if he were a

dog and said to all those sitting on the floor at large, “Good boys. At least you can be trained. You get to keep your jobs for a little while longer. Now run along home and play dead, until tomorrow when I’ll have you rollover for me so you can show me your tricks.”

Red-faced and ashamed those who’d sat on the floor got up and filed out of the room as quickly as they could. What those individuals had just lost wasn’t worth the few extra paychecks that they would receive.

Francesca turned to me and gave me an affirmative nod in indication for me to proceed.

I stepped forward and sorting through the file dossiers in my arms I distributed the corresponding folders to their prospective owners. There were

shocked gasps and horror stricken faces in the wake of my disbursement of the folders that contained embarrassing blackmail material unique to every individual in the room.

I had sympathy for those receiving this further shock to their shaken careers. I'd had no part of the search to come up with the dirt on these people. Francesca had other people for that.

Everyone with their file folders tightly shut now stared in expectant dread at Francesca, who looked like the cat who'd swallowed the canary.

"All of you have significant holdings of stock in Panolic International." Francesca said. She then laid a sheet of paper on the table beside her and dropped a pen to go with it.

She smiled wickedly at those still

gathered in the room and said, “Find your names on this sheet next to your stock options and sign them over to me. You leave this company with nothing or.....” She paused for effect as she addressed the room at large, “or I release what each of you holds in your hands and make your past misdeeds a matter of public knowledge. Good luck getting another job in this city or any other.”

It was brutal. There was no other way to go about describing it.

One by one the executives lined up to sign away their stocks in the company to Francesca. Some lost tens of thousands, while others lost millions, but in commonality they all lost something for their show of pride.

Five individuals walked out the door

without signing the paper of which both Francesca's former husband and the chairman of the board were among.

Francesca spitefully glared after the five men who had refused to play her game.

As the doors closed on the last individual she glanced over to me, "See that their files are released immediately to the press!"

I nodded in accordance with her vengeful command.

Francesca turned back to the now empty boardroom and laughed out with a mirth bordering on the insane, "We'll give it about a month before we leak all their files through a third-party to the press. The pack of fools! Panolic is mine and ready to be crushed!" She laughed again, as I silently stood still not far

from her side.

I hated this woman with an intensely controlled passion. I kept hoping that someone would bump her off and do the hard time for it so I didn't have to.

To say that Francesca Marelli took after a female dog wasn't a strong enough comparison. Actually, it was an insult to the dog. Francesca Marelli was a devil.

She turned away from the window and I could see that she was on an emotional high with having achieved the success of her highly expensive and spiteful takeover of her former husband's business. Francesca was a woman of manic moods and when she got high like this or worse yet low, she was best to be avoided.

I would have left if it was possible,

but I couldn't so I stayed where I was maintaining the cool serenity of my features. She smiled at me and beckoned with a finger and I feared the worst was about to happen.

Francesca leaned back against the mahogany table and eyed me over speculatively as I approached. She shook her head knowingly, as a wicked smile played about her garishly painted lips, "You manifest yourself as such an ice queen, but we both know differently don't we Kim."

She reached out and stroked my chin with a finger in a familiar gesture that I hated coming from her. She straightened up and stepped closer to me and I had to fight to keep a mask of control in place.

She let her hand slide down from my chin to my chest where she began to

fondle one of my breasts through my blouse and bra. It was the most overt come on to me that she had made yet and I feared that it was about to get worse.

Rubbing her manicured fingers enough upon me to elicit an unwanted reaction she smugly said, “You’ve been quite useful to me throughout this whole process Kim and now that all the hard work on your end is complete I think it’s time that we took things to a whole new level so to speak. I didn’t want to distract you too much from your purpose before, but now that everything’s well in hand I find that there’s time to play again and I do very much want to play with you Kim.”

She was taller than me and I had to fight to stay still as she leaned down and kissed me fully on the lips. I stayed still

through it and when she finally pulled back she had a satisfied look on her face at having shook me up from my usually cool reserve.

I looked her square in the eye and said, "I'm not going to be your whore! Our business relationship together does not extend that far!"

She stroked my chin again as she chuckled wickedly, "Honey our relationship goes as far as I say it does and you know it. Don't forget what I have over your gorgeous head of hair darling. All it takes is one phone call and a package will be sent on its way. By all means resist me if you want honey, but you'll pay one way or the other."

I said nothing in reply. I had a lot of respect for the five men who had walked

out and risked the loss of everything that mattered to them.

They'd done something that I had never managed to do. I just didn't have the guts to face that kind of loss.

Francesca straightened the lapels of my blouse as she took my silence to be a surrender to the inevitable, "That's better. Glad to see that you're coming around to your senses. Now I'm having a party at my place in the country tomorrow. It's sort of a victory celebration if you will and no one is more worthy of being honored as part of the victory team than you are my dear. It is clear to me, that without your legal and expert advice, today wouldn't have gone off nearly so smoothly and for that I am very grateful to you. You've done your job well, like a good pet." She

said, as she grasped my chin firmly and shook my head slightly back and forth.

She smiled then and there was nothing nice about the smile, “Don’t worry darling I’ll break you in easy. No bruises to start out I promise. I sent you a package. It should arrive this afternoon. Wear what you find in it to the party if you know what’s good for you. See you at seven Kim.”

She let go of my chin and made to pass by me, but stopped alongside of me. The long fingernails of her hand dug into one of the cheeks of my bottom painfully through the dress I wore as she leaned in close to my ear to say, “And if you should perhaps be thinking about switching sides and being a little tattletale I don’t suggest it! Don’t forget that you are involved knee-deep yourself

in all the highly illegal activities and procedures that we've had to do in order to make this hostile takeover such a thriving success. While a jail cell may look like a more tempting alternative to you than my upcoming party and amorous plans for you I assure you it is not! I have friends in high places and the money to see that I live like a queen for a year or two behind bars as I serve a highly reduced sentence, while you will be a worn-out broken piece of raw flesh within a week. Don't doubt me Kim, I will see to it if you double-cross me!"

Her taloned grasp of my bottom changed to a rubbing stroke before she let go and said, "It would be a shame to waste such a hot body as yours in such a manner to the likes of prison filth. I think you'll find my attentions and the

attentions of my friends far more of a pleasurable alternative and then of course you'll still have your career and clueless family. Now I really do have to run and complete my victory lap today, but maybe later I'll warm myself up with one of your videos. They always turn me on!" She smacked me hard on the rear then and with a laugh walked out of the boardroom with a flourish letting the doors fall closed behind her.

Chapter Two

Past Sins

I stood there alone within the room as tears of impotent fury coursed down my cheeks to splatter on the expensive parquet marble floor. I wiped them away with the sleeve of my blouse and then at my lips roughly not caring if the wiped off lipstick stained the blouse or not.

After a few moments of silent rage I turned to the door. I saw a trashcan and going to it I tossed the un-passed out dirt files into it. It was garbage anyway.

I left then and made my way through

the ranks of concerned employees who were in a shocked daze at their sudden joblessness. I had helped put them there and for what?

To keep my head above water as it were?

Francesca's laughter rang out from somewhere else in the building and reminded me of something of a biblical import. In the effort to keep my head above water I'd landed in hell and the laughter of my tormentor only brought that realization to full light.

Life was hopeless!

It always had been, but now it was doubly so. It didn't matter what one did to bury or move on from past mistakes. They always had a way of resurfacing to the forefront and multiplying.

I wanted to scream, actually I just

wanted to lay down and die. Like an old animal too tired of life to continue taking in the needed nutrition to support life.

I was on the street and instead of calling for a cab I just walked. Eventually I found myself outside my apartment building.

Listlessly I made my way up to it in complete apathy of spirit. There was a package leaning against my door.

The sudden desire to commit murder came to full life within me. I didn't have a gun, but I knew where I could get one on the street.

I rested my head against the door jam. It didn't matter.

Even if I did kill Francesca the package she held over my head would still be sent on its way.

Who was I kidding!

She'd send it anyway someday just for kicks, even if I did everything she wanted and let her use me at will.

Oh God what was I going to do?

Against every fiber of my being I picked the package up and entered my apartment. I was so deep in now I didn't know anything else other than to go in deeper.

I set the package on the kitchen table and stared at it for several moments before I started to open it. Francesca's future path for me became very real as I pulled the box apart to see what was inside. How fitting it was that what lay within the box was a leather manifestation of a slave girl outfit, because that was exactly what I was.

I let the lid of the box fall shut and crying I looked away as I said, "Break

me in easy, yeah right!” I whispered out bitterly.

Francesca Marelli among her many unsavory business holdings owned a string of domination nightclubs and lounges. She thought rather highly of herself as a dominatrix both in the boardroom and in the bedroom. I apparently was the newest piece of flesh to be abused and added to her growing collection.

Screaming out in fury I wiped the box off the table with one arm, but my act of anger didn't change anything. Crying I ran out of my apartment in a need of fresh air, as I was overcome with the need to escape from everything.

I pushed open the rusted door to the roof and stepped out into the warmth of the late afternoon sun. I made my way to the edge of the roof.

All the way up here I'd been fighting to deny the solution that had come to mind. It was simple really. If I jumped I would be dead. I would have paid once and for all for my sins.

The box and its contents wouldn't be sent and nobody after a brief few months of mourning would be any the worse for wear. I looked at the street level so far below and some form of reasoning slipped into my fractured consciousness.

I sank to my knees crying against the stained concrete of the building's roof. If I committed suicide it would hurt my family as much if not more than if they found out about me and what I had done

to pay for college and law school.

I left the rooftop before I changed my mind. I didn't know what to do, but suicide wasn't an option I could entertain.

I walked for hours most of them aimlessly and it was a surprise that I looked up to discover myself at the ornate door of the house before me. I hadn't intended on coming here. I almost turned away, but I fought down that cowardice urge to leave. There had been too much cowardice on my part up till now. I had an apology to make.

I pressed the doorbell and waited. The door opened after a moment to reveal Jim Swanson, the former chairman of the board that I had just helped to depose and run into the dirt.

His eyes took me in and his look

abruptly became hostile, “What do you want?”

His words were cuttingly harsh, but to be expected. My chin quivered and my tears came back to fall with abandon. I gave a choked out sob as I tried to frame words.

His look of hostility vanished and he stepped outside the door with a look of concern as he asked, “Are you okay?”

His evident concern over me, of all people, just made the tears come harder.

A knowing look came to his eyes as he handed me a handkerchief from his pocket, “She has dirt on you too doesn’t she?”

I nodded, as I took the rag from him. I wiped my face and forced myself to look him in the eyes as I said, “I’m so sorry! I helped to do the very thing to you that

I've tried to avoid happening to myself. I don't care if you forgive me, but I want you to know that I'm sorry!"

I started to cry harder again and made to step back and flee the scene, but he stepped closer and stooped down to look me in the eyes and say, "I forgive you!"

His voice was solid and the meaning of his words clear, but I didn't understand him.

"How can you say that? I've ruined your life haven't I?" I exclaimed.

Jim looked at me kindly and said, "I can forgive because I have been forgiven."

He looked to his side and gestured to someone. An older woman of about fifty stepped up beside of Jim and linked her arm with his.

“Do you know what the dirt Francesca had on me was?” Jim asked.

I shook my head no.

Jim looked to the woman I took to be his wife, who smiled lovingly at him in return.

Jim looked back to me and in a choked up tone said, “Five years ago I was away on an extended business trip. I met a woman and we had an affair that lasted for about a week before I broke it off. I made a mistake. A big mistake! I betrayed so much! I was completely guilt ridden over it. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t tell Grace what happened, because I didn’t want to see how much I had hurt her. A year went by. It was the most miserable year of my entire marriage. One night I broke down and told her what had happened. She already

knew!”

I looked from Jim to his wife, who hadn't ceased from holding on to him. Jim was openly crying now as he glanced from me to his wife. I glanced between the two of them in wonder. There was real love in their eyes for each other, an undying affection and it made me cry all the harder.

“A friend of Grace's was on vacation and saw me with the other woman. Grace knew for an entire year, but never said anything. She loved me and cared for me as she always did. I don't deserve her or her forgiveness, but I have both and I thank God for it! I can forgive so easily, because I've been forgiven of so much! Francesca doesn't know about my wife knowing of my affair as neither of us has ever told

anyone else. I don't think a woman like Francesca would understand any way." He said and I nodded in agreement with him.

I rubbed at my eyes, "I'm happy for you two. Thank you for your forgiveness!" I turned to leave, but a gentle clasp on my arm stopped me. It was Grace, Jim's wife.

"What's your name?" She asked softly.

"Kim Pollock." I said in response.

She stepped forward away from her husband and took both of my hands with hers, "Kim I don't know what this evil woman has over you, but I have some advice I feel led to impart to you. The saddest thing I witnessed after my husband's affair was that he waited a year to tell me. He put himself through a

living hell, when all he had to do was come to me. Whoever it is you're protecting some terrible secret from, stop! If they love you then they will forgive you whatever it is. The longer you keep this a secret the worse it's going to get!"

"You don't understand! I can't tell them! They raised me better than to do what I did. I....." I shook my head helplessly for lack of words to express the hopelessness of my situation.

Jim's hand closed over my shoulder and I looked up to him to hear him say, "Yes you can and you should! Trust me, I know what you're going through, but the correct course of action is to do the right thing! The thing you know that's right to do in your heart like coming here to apologize tonight. Even at the risk of

losing their love honesty is what you owe those to whom you love. You have to do the right thing or you'll never be free!"

Both of their words were hitting me hard and I balled out in misery, "But their missionaries!"

That didn't even make sense to say. I was making a complete fool of myself, but neither of them were treating me like they saw me as a fool.

Grace peered into my eyes in a way that made me feel like she saw all the way to my soul, "Are you a Christian Kim?"

I stuttered on the response, "I was once, but I....."

She cut me off as she squeezed my hands firmly, "He still loves you!"

Her words were delivered softly in

the gentle caring manner that was about her as a person, but there was an authority to them as well as the truth in her eyes that was beyond question and which completely overpowered me. I let my head fall forward to her shoulder and I cried like I never had before as her arms came around me tightly.

Never would I have expected such an outreach from a perfect stranger and one at whose family I had plotted against. I really was making a fool of myself now.

I pulled back slightly only to see her loving eyes still focused on me with an even greater intensity than before. I sobered up a little and she spoke, “You may not see it right now Kim, but I see a Divine plan emerging through all this. Good is going to come of what was meant for evil. I’m going to leave you

with two things I want you to do.”

I nodded, willing to do anything this woman asked of me.

“First I want you to get with God in a private moment and ask for His forgiveness over whatever it is that haunts you and has driven you to this point.”

I nodded.

“Then I want you to do whatever you know is the right thing to do regardless of the risks as you trust God that He will be there for you.”

I nodded again willing to do both things.

“Now let me get you a coat dear, it’s freezing out here and you don’t even have a jacket on. Jim will you go down and hail a cab for her please?”

Jim eased by me toward the street and

Grace was back moments later with a fur coat that probably cost several thousand dollars.

“I can’t ta.....” I said, but she waved a hand motioning my words to a stop.

“Yes you can my dear besides I’ve gained a few pounds sad to say over the years and I haven’t worn it in a long time, but it should be a perfect fit for you.”

It was and it felt warm just like the heart of its owner.

“I’ll bring it back!” I said.

She just smiled, “Keep it dear, but I wouldn’t mind you coming back to have tea next week with me at all.”

Slowly, as I formulated a plan in my head as to what do I said, “I would love that, but I’m going to be out of the country then.”

She smiled, "I thought you might be."

There was a taxi pulled up at the curb and Jim was waiting by it. I whispered a thank you to Grace, who gave me another hug anyway.

I walked up to cab as Jim held the door open for me. I stopped and looked up at him. It was time to do the right thing.

"You're going to receive a packet in the mail in a day or so. In it will be everything you need to bury Francesca and all her enterprises. You'll be able to reclaim Panolic Enterprises and give the people back their jobs."

He looked overcome with emotion at my words, "Thank you! On behalf of all the worker's families I say thank you!"

I nodded, "It's the right thing to do."

I stepped past him to sit down in the

cab. I looked back up at him, “Could I ask a personal favor of you?”

“Name it!” He said.

I looked down at my hands, “My name is featured heavily in the illegal actions that Francesca enacted in order to bring Panolic down. I’m not asking you to destroy evidence or anything, but could you give me a day before you go to the police? I don’t care if I go to jail, but I’d like to be able to say what needs said to the couple who raised me face-to-face. Afterwards I promise that I’ll come back and see justice served for my part in all this.”

“Where are your adoptive parents?”

“Their missionaries to New Guinea.”

“New Guinea.” Jim said softly as if to himself. His eyes met mine as he said, “Sounds like a good place to stay lost.”

Why don't you stay lost there for a few months and then send me a postcard with an address and I'll send you enough money for you to stay lost."

"That's sweet of you, but I don't want to get you in trouble. I'll come back and serve my time."

He shook his head no, "Turning over evidence like you have is apt to get you a reduced sentence of one to two years, but I now have a first-class experience as to how vindictive Francesca Marelli can be. You wouldn't last one month in prison and justice wouldn't be served by you dying in such a way. I'm satisfied with everyone getting their jobs back and the schemer behind all this being brought to justice. That's more than enough for me. Send me a postcard and have a good life Kim. God bless!"

I was crying again as he closed the car door gently. The cab merged into the street as I sat in the back in a state of profound shock.

It had all happened just like Grace had said it would. I had made a choice and done the right thing, even though I knew it would cost me my life and yet God had made a way where there was none before. I didn't have to go to prison and face the hell that I'd be in for there!

Fresh tears came to my eyes as it dawned on me that God still cared for me!

Somehow knowing that helped everything else. I still had to tell my parents though. I'd break the news to my brother first as he lived in the city. I didn't want to tell him any more than I wanted to tell my adoptive parents, but it

was best to cover all the bases that mattered, as I didn't put it past Francesca for a moment not to send out multiple boxes of incriminating material.

Chapter Three

Emotional Exchange

I stepped into my apartment ignoring the box and its spilled out contents on the floor. I was no one's slave girl!

I was my own woman. I liked my independence, but if I was to ever feel physical touch again in my life it would be a man's touch and not that of a woman's.

The problem was that I did not want a

man's touch. I never had. It had been a far easier and comfortable thing to accept a woman's touch than it had been a man's. I'd known it was wrong though and eventually that was why I had stopped, but it hadn't been easy and it was still a temptation for me.

I hated myself and my weakness all the more for it. The forbidden had only brought me ruin and threatened the loss of those I cared about most.

I walked to the window and looked out not really seeing anything in the bright night lights of the city. I brought my phone up from my pocket and dialed the first contact and let it ring.

“Hey Sis what's up?”

I closed my eyes at the sound of my twin brother's voice and prayed for courage.

“Keko there’s something very important that I need to talk to you about. Could we meet in the morning somewhere?”

“Sure! My shift starts at seven; maybe we could meet in the park around six and grab a coffee?” Came his quick response.

I fought to hold onto my emotions and quickly said, “That sounds great! I’ll see you then.”

“Is something wrong Kim? You don’t sound right.” Came my brother’s perceptive voice over the phone line.

“We’ll talk in the morning. Good night Keko. I love you!” I said quickly before ending the call.

I held the phone in the fist that I pressed tightly against my lips. Would my brother love me the same after

tomorrow morning?

The constant war of thought and emotion over that very thing kept me awake all night.

I fingered the sealed edge of the thickly stuffed manila envelope for a moment. Francesca was about to take a fall, however, so was I. I'd never be able to return to a country like the United States ever again.

It was a small price to pay to see that countless people got their jobs back. I opened the flap of the mailbox outside Jim Swanson's house and let the manila envelope slide into it.

Briskly I hurried away feeling lighter of burden inside, but dreading the

emotional exchange that was to come with my brother. He wasn't going to be happy.

In fact I was pretty sure he would be mad. Very mad! It couldn't be helped though.

I made my way over several blocks to the little pocket park that we liked to meet at some times for lunch. It was cold and my breath hung in the air about me.

My Polynesian ancestry had no love for this cold weather. In some ways it would be a relief to get back to a warmer climate and one that I was more used to. That was about as much relief as there would be though.

There were reasons why I had escaped the warm islands of my ancestry. It would be like a reopening of old wounds going back even as a fresh

one was opened.

Keko was already there standing with an extra coffee beside the water fountain that had been turned off and drained for the winter. I stepped up to him and took the freely offered coffee.

I gave a warm smile of appreciation before my eyes fell downward to the cup warming up my cold hands. Keko's fingers pushed back several strands of my long black hair that had fallen forward.

I looked up my eyes awash with tears. He was looking at me with concern, but he didn't say anything as he took my coffee cup and set it on a nearby table. His arms enfolded me and I hugged him fiercely in return. He led me over to a bench and after a long moment of silence I knew it was time for my confession to

begin.

I looked up to meet his lovingly patient gaze on me, “Several years ago I made a very bad mistake, which led to another and more after that. I’ve tried my best to bury them and to act as if they never happened, but someone found out and used what I had done in the past to blackmail me. I did highly illegal things for this person. Enough to send me to jail for a very long time. I’m trying to make things right and so I’ve turned in evidence that will expose not only what I’ve done illegally, but the dark motivations and actions behind the empire of who’s been blackmailing me.”

I stopped talking as I gathered what nerves were left to me as I prepared to go into the most ugly part of my confession.

Keko spoke into the pause, “So I’m guessing that since you’ve turned your back on whoever’s been blackmailing you that now they’re going to make public whatever it is they’ve been holding over your head?”

I nodded miserably.

His brow was furrowed in concentration and I could tell he was getting worked up emotionally, but his gaze was still open to me.

Slowly, feeling like I was exposing myself to be run through with a knife I asked, “Didn’t you ever wonder how I paid for college Koke?”

He looked away from me and said, “A buddy of mine said he thought he saw you or your twin look-alike flashing a crowd in one of those college girl gone wild videos. I never wanted to ask you

about it. Figured it was private and I really didn't actually believe it could be you, but it was wasn't it?" He asked as he returned his gaze to stare at me and I nodded in confirmation, even as I felt myself bust up inside a little more as I saw some of my brother's respect for me die in his eyes.

"That was how it started. I made good money on the videos. I saw how hard you worked at three jobs to get through medical school and I didn't want that. I wanted more free time and the ability to go out with my friends and buy nice things. The money from the videos helped fund that lifestyle, but my college debt was racking up and my credit cards were all but maxed out. I had received offers before, but I'd turned them down. Then one day I didn't turn them down.

The offers were for leading roles in porn movies and in men's magazines. I knew it was wrong, but the other things were more important to me and I needed the money. I hid it from you and I wouldn't have done it actually if I thought you would've found out. I knew you didn't look at or watch porn though so I thought it was a safe bet that I'd get away with it."

Keko got up and began to pace back and forth in front of me. I watched him my heart broken inside of me at how stupid I had been in my youth to put material things on such a high pedestal that I was now seeing the loss of something priceless.

Keko finally spoke and his tone expressed his outrage even as he fought hard to keep it tightly restrained in his

effort to sound understanding, “So you had sex with men on live shot porn videos and stuff like that?”

“Worse.” I said in a small voice.

He stopped pacing then and looked at me closely, “How could it be worse?”

I couldn't meet his eyes and I dropped mine downward as I finished the sad tale, “You know I don't like to be touched by men, because of the kind of things that went on when we were kids. When I signed up I had the choice to star opposite of male actors or female actors. I chose to be with the women instead. I thought a woman's touch would be less objectionable.”

I flinched as Keko exclaimed in a hard tone, “You're a lesbian!”

“I was. At first it was just the stuff that was done on the set, but later I had a

relationship with my roommate in law school that lasted for two years. I broke it off though and I haven't been with anybody since.”

I still couldn't look up at him but I could feel him staring at me.

“I can't believe that you would throw everything away like that!”

I sank into the bench wishing it would swallow me up. I looked up trying to see his face through my tears and sobbed out, “I'm sorry!”

Some of the anger left his face and he looked away as he emotionally said, “I know we had it tough as kids and things were done that shouldn't have been, but I thought we left all that behind when the Pollock's adopted us when we were twelve!”

“I did too! I'm sorry that I've let you,

Tom, and Esther down. I'd change it all if I had it over to do again, but I can't!"

"What are you going to do now?" Keko asked.

"I've reserved a spot on a flight out of the country in the early afternoon. I want to talk to Tom and Esther before they get their package."

"That would probably be for the best." Keko said in agreement even as his voice sounded strangely foreign to me. My head sank down as I bitterly acknowledged that I had lost my brother.

"Kim?"

I looked up to my brother.

"I need some time to get a handle on all this."

I nodded.

He started to leave, but I quickly grabbed a hold of his hand and in a

pleading voice I asked, “Keko if you get a package of stuff about me please don’t look at any of it!”

He nodded curtly and left the park.

My endless tears seemed frozen to my face and I shivered. I looked over at my coffee cup. It had grown cold just as my brother’s love for me had.

Fresh hot tears fell as I collapsed over onto my side on the bench not caring if anybody saw me. It didn’t seem to matter that I was trying to do the right thing. Oh God, I was losing everything anyway!

Chapter Four

Window Seat

I kept my face down and didn't make eye contact with anyone as I boarded the plane and searched around for my seat. I couldn't help it. I was female and despite everything going on I was embarrassed about my puffy bloodshot eyes and red swollen cheeks.

I hadn't packed much. In fact all I had was the carry-on bag that I had boarded the plane with. I had some clothing and other feminine product type stuff and the few thousand in cash that I'd managed to

layaway.

With the high cost of affording a decent apartment and Francesca not paying me very much I was lucky to have what extra money I did have. It wasn't much to build a new life with, but it would have to do until Swanson sent more to me.

Thankfully even given the short notice I had been able to get a window seat. I turned to stare out the window so I didn't have to look at anyone.

Passengers continued to board and someone sat down in the seat beside me. I'd been hoping that it would remain unfilled.

Gradually a familiar scent reached me and I turned in shock to see Keko sitting beside me.

He smiled wanly, "Surprise."

“What are you doing here?” I exclaimed, as I heard the flight attendants say that takeoff was imminent.

“I had some vacation time coming to me and I thought I’d tag along as moral support so to speak.”

“The hospital just let you take off time without any prior notice?” I exclaimed.

“Well, no actually they didn’t so I had to quit.”

“You quit your job! Please tell me you didn’t do that!”

His eyes were warm and his hand was even warmer as he interlaced his fingers with mine and said, “I’m a skilled and highly sought after surgeon. I get job offers every day so don’t worry about me. I have but one sister and I love you very much! I wish none of this had ever happened, but it has and now we’re

going to get through this as a family. I want to apologize for leaving you alone in the park this morning. It wasn't very loving or grown up on my part in terms of how to treat a person let alone my sister who was asking for forgiveness."

I just stared at him as I saw everything I had thought lost was still there burning brightly in his eyes. I let my tired head fall against his shoulder and I closed my eyes in peace.

"You're the best brother ever!" I whispered out as I held his hand tightly.

"And you're my favorite sister." He said with humor.

"I'm your only sister." I quipped back at him.

"See, there you go." He said with a well-meaning chuckle.

I smiled softly loving the solid

presence of my brother beside me. Tiredness overcame me and I gave up to it as I relaxed for the first time in a long time. I'd faced the worst and still come through it alive with my brother by my side. Things were working out after all.

I slept most of the long flight across the country to California, where we boarded the overseas flight to New Guinea. It was Keko's turn to sleep then, but I was wide awake with nothing to do.

I glanced at my brother and grinned when I saw that he was slightly drooling. I got a napkin and dabbed at the corner of his mouth slightly. He would be so embarrassed to know this was

happening.

I studied him as he slept. My brother was a handsome man and everywhere he went women turned their heads, but none had ever snared anything more than a passing fancy as a dinner companion or someone to see a show with.

I'd asked him why he didn't settle down, when he had his pick of anyone he wanted along with the money that came with being a rising world-class surgeon. He'd said that he was waiting for the right one.

I wished I'd done that, but that would've meant being with a man. I didn't know about that yet. Maybe it would happen.

I was twenty-eight. If I wanted children I had better start thinking about it.

I wasn't sure I wanted children. I'd had such a mixed up childhood. My own mother had been a flop at the job of raising a family and in some ways I thought I'd do little better than her if given the opportunity, at least that was my fear.

I didn't want to mess up my kids like that. Better not to have any then, but I couldn't help how alone I felt. I wasn't going back to the kind of relationships that I had escaped from though.

Shamefully I admitted to myself that it was still a temptation that I struggled against. I made up my mind then as to something.

I glanced out my window at the dark of the night passing by. The next time, if there was a next time it would be with a man and it would be for keeps like it

was supposed to be.

Slowly I whispered out, “I make that a promise to you God! I solemnly swear, but please as much as I don’t want to be alone in life I also don’t want to surrender to a man and experience his touch and control over me. Help me change! I want to change! I need to change! I will change!” I finished resolutely, as I addressed maybe perhaps the first prayer I’d said in years to my Creator, who in large part I had hoped had completely forgotten me and my sin.

A sudden deep ripple of awareness went through me as it was made divinely clear to me that I was going to be held to my sworn out oath of willingness to change and experience a man’s headship over me.

I pressed a tightly clamped fist to my lips as I stared out the window in sudden panic of thought. Such an awareness feeling could only mean that what I'd sworn to would likely happen!

Oh God!

I should never have sworn to such a thing and yet it had seemed the right thing to do in my effort to turn my life around from the sorry place I'd taken it. It had been the right thing to do.

“Oh God help me!” I cried out softly against my knuckles in extreme fear of the future.

Peace seemed to hit me with a force that had me laying my head back against the seat on the verge of falling asleep, which soon became a reality.

Chapter Five

A Glass To Far

I don't know how long I'd slept, but I was jarred awake at the sound of turbulence rattling the glasses and cupboards in the cab of the aircraft. There was something else that was off about the atmosphere besides just the unwelcome turbulence. Everything was dark except for the dim glow of the walkway lights as mostly everyone was asleep.

I pondered on what it could be that was off about the atmosphere of the

plane. I realized what the second thing was that had helped to awaken me. The plane was turning!

Turbulence was to be expected, but turning was alarming!

I got up and was careful not to disturb Koke in my passage past him to get to the main aisle. I headed for the bathroom area as the plane shook again.

The turbulence was harder this time and I had to catch myself against a seat slightly jarring awake its occupant in the process. I quickly moved on to the bathroom area.

I saw a stewardess stationed there and I diverted over to her and asked, “Why are we turning?”

“Nothing to be alarmed over Miss. A storm’s been detected and the Captains just diverting a bit to miss it.” Was her

quick response and her professionalism helped relax any concern I had over the unexpected occurrence.

Suddenly thirsty I asked, “Can I have another glass of water?”

“Certainly!” She said as she rose to her feet, but just then a mother somewhere forward started calling out for what I presumed to be a wayward child.

The stewardess started forward and then seemed to remember me in mid step. I could see that she was torn between two tasks and I quickly helped her out by saying, “Just show me where I can get a glass and I’ll help myself.”

Relieved the stewardess pointed to a cupboard higher up near the ceiling, “Sorry, but that’s where they keep the extras.” She said by way of apology, as

she turned to hurry down the aisle in search of the lost child.

I approached the high cupboard. I leaned up on my toes, but my fingers were short of the handle by about three inches. I was too short.

Angrily I castigated against myself that I was not overly short, but neither was I exactly of average height either I had to admit. I sighed in frustration. At least no one had seen this embarrassing attempt on my part.

A hand tanned dark brown with curly black hairs liberally sprinkled across the back of it reached out over my head and opened the cupboard. The breadth of the big hand and its fingers easily spanned out over the top of two glasses, which it removed to down somewhere behind my back.

I realized that I'd stopped breathing at the appearance of the hand. Breath made its way back in and shakily I turned to press my back up against the lower cupboard doors.

The man was as imposing and ultra-masculine as the hand and arm I had seen had been. He wasn't looking at me as he poured both glasses full from a nearby pitcher of water.

He was easily over six feet in height and I didn't like how far up I had to look, as it only made me feel more intensely aware of my short stature.

Instead of being lean, along with the extra height as a lot of tall men were, he wasn't. Oh he was fit, but the muscles and large bone structure that filled out his tall frame just said big with a capital B.

He wore blue jeans that had frayed holes in them that looked like they'd gotten there through hard work and not bought over-the-counter pre-distressed. The white T-shirt he wore stretched out over the wide expanse of his chest hugging all the dips and hollows of his muscles.

A riotous amount of black curly hair covered his arms and spilled out of the top of his T-shirt in a ring around his neck that echoed to the fact that he was likely extremely hairy all over. His jaw was square and reflected the raw power that the rest of his frame only emphasized.

His hair was black and he was in need of a haircut. He had a shadow of a beard that probably took most men a week to grow, but had only taken him a day or

two. In short he exuded maleness in a way that modern men of the city and urban spheres of life had long since lost in favor of cultured features and crisp linen suits.

The unwanted realization of this midnight encounter with a man from some bygone era of warriorhood were all starting to add up to something. A silent scream of 'NO!!!' went off in my head repeatedly; even as a response more deep and powerful that seemed to reflect the essence of what I was made of let off an affirming, 'Yes!!!'

I almost started crying.

I covered my panic, brought on by this strange encounter with a male in the night, by martialling my will to keep my face unreadable of my inner turmoil. The man turned hard slate gray eyes to me

and held out one of the glasses of water silently.

Water?

Suddenly I remembered that I had been thirsty. I took the glass and mumbled out a thank you.

“You’re welcome.”

His voice was as deep as I had expected it to be and it shook something inside of me. This was all bad!

I had to get out!

I took a sip of the water not really focusing on it at all. I made one last effort to be cordial before I made my retreat away from the close confines of this little kitchen area and the man whose presence seemed to dominate the atmosphere of it so completely.

“Thank you again. You didn’t have to get up.”

“It was worth it for the view.” He said matter-of-factly.

I blinked and then burning with anger at his apparent crudity I hotly said, “Excuse me?”

The question was of course rhetorical and meant only to garner an apology for his rudeness of context. His response was given in an even tone that had no budge to it.

“You heard me.”

I felt hot blood rush to my face and I had the sudden urge to hit him. Instead I slammed down the glass of water and stalked back into the cab of the plane towards my seat. I was halfway there when I realized that my first reason for getting up had not been satisfied. I had to go to the bathroom.

My face now completely red from a

mixture of embarrassment and anger I turned to go back. I kept myself from meeting the hard gray eyes of the insufferable man who still lounged against the countertop within the kitchenette and stepped into the tiny compartment of the restroom facility that was nearby.

Upon leaving the restroom I headed back down the aisle to my seat. I felt the heat of his eyes tracing my form as I went. I did my best to curb the sway of my walk, but I was a wide hipped girl and there was little to be done.

I glanced back to the galley when I reached Koke who was still asleep. The big stranger was still there leaning up against the counter with his eyes trained on me. He lifted his free hand and flashed five fingers and then flashed four

after that.

Molten anger coursed throughout me at the realization that he just rated my *derrière* a nine out of ten!

I thought about waking Koke to tell him to go beat the man up, but the beat down would likely go the opposite way in short order. Angrily I made my way past Koke who came awake startled at my disruption of his sleep.

He looked as if he was still caught in the lingering moments of a dream not quite sure what reality was yet.

He blinked repeatedly and looked at me sharply as I sat down in my seat.

“What put you on fire?” He asked dazedly.

I didn’t answer, but turned my head to stare out the window.

Was I so mad because of the

stranger's frank appreciation of my female form or because he'd only rated my derrière a nine out of ten?

I glared balefully at the window and stated with categorical emphasis, "He is not the man!"

"What did you say?" Koke asked puzzled.

"Nothing!" I said even further embarrassed to know that I had just spoken what I had out loud.

Koke glanced from his sister where she sat turned away from him glaring a hole through the glass of her window to the open galley back a ways and the man that still stood there. He turned back in his seat and said, "I had a dream."

He glanced over to Kim, but his sister was too lost in her angered state of mind to have heard him. He glanced back to the source of his sister's agitation again. This bore some investigation.

Koke got up and walked back to the galley. Upon entering the galley and seeing the stranger up close two things were immediately validated to Koke within his consciousness. His dream had been a foreshadowing of future events and his sister wasn't beyond the allure of being interested in a strong male.

The latter was a good thing. Hopefully both things would turn out for the good.

The man was undeniably rough looking of character, as he was brutally strong of form, but there was some indefinable quality within the man that caused Koke to instantly like him. The

stranger met his head on gaze not wavering a bit.

Koke glanced down to the glass of water on the counter and indicating it he asked, “My sisters?”

The man nodded.

Koke picked the glass up and finished the water off. He didn't mind sharing his sister's amoebas; after all they had shared a womb together for nine months.

Koke looked at the man curiously, “What did you say to rile my sister's temper up so?”

The man shrugged noncommittally.

“Well whatever it was you did a good job of it. She's hard to rattle.”

Koke sensed a softening about the man and stuck his hand out, “Koke Pollock.”

The man looked at the hand and then reached his own out to shake it firmly,

“Colt Brennan.”

At the release of hands Koke speculatively asked, “Colt Firearms Company?”

Colt responded with a slight smile, “Yes, my father had an extensive collection of them. I guess his love of the guns poured over to naming me after them.”

“It suits you. You look like something powerful that’s ready to go off at a moment’s notice.” Koke responded honestly.

Colt studied Koke in return curiously, “Why did you come back here to talk?”

“I had a dream..... no, I think it was a vision and it’s led me here to you.”

The two men stared at each other trying to gauge the intentions of the other.

Koke spoke first, “Let’s talk about my

sister.”

Colt regarded him cautiously before saying, “Okay.”

“Do you find her attractive?” Koke asked.

“Did the sun rise on the planet somewhere today?” Colt responded with.

Koke smiled at Colt’s poetic response to his question, but then he sobered up quickly as he said, “What would you say if I told you something extreme is about to happen? Something beyond anything you’ve ever seen occur before.”

Colt folded his arms and studied Koke for a moment before responding with, “Well I’d say you don’t look like the crazy type, but I’ve been wrong before. Go ahead, I’ll listen and give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Koke shook his head in response, “It’s not clear to me yet what’s going to happen in general, but one detail is. I need you to look after my sister and keep her safe.”

Colt straightened away from the counter he’d been leaning against and flatly said, “I don’t babysit!”

Koke wasn’t put off by the sudden aggression of the other man in the slightest, “As I’m sure you’ve noticed for yourself my sister is no baby.”

“What are you saying?” Colt asked slowly.

“Her father is dead, her stepfather isn’t here, but as her brother you have my blessing to take things deeper with my sister if you should wish to.”

Looking angry now Colt harshly accused, “What kind of man goes around

giving his sister away to strangers?”

Koke nodded, “I assure you that I am equally shocked by what I am doing, but the question remains the same. Will you take custody of my sister’s livelihood and keep her safe.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s not good enough. I need an answer now!”

Colt shook his head as unbelief washed across his features, “You’re crazy! I’ll say yes, but only because I don’t want you going and passing her off to someone else and embarrassing yourself or her any more than you already have.”

Koke seemed to relax at Colt’s words and said, “It’s settled then.”

He left the galley and went back to his seat to sit down beside his sister who

had fallen asleep. He felt weird for what he'd just been a part of, but he was also at peace about it.

Colt looked forward and watched as the hot girl's crazy brother sat down. What had he just gotten himself into and why on Earth had he agreed to such an arrangement?

It had just seemed to slip out of him.

He gripped the glass hard in his hand to the point of shattering it. He had a strong desire for the man's sister, but that wasn't the reason for his agreeing to the brother's request.

The girl was hot, but hot or not he'd never agree to something like this. It had been something in the man's eyes.

Something that couldn't be faked.

Colt looked around the plane area speculatively. What was going to happen?

He'd had a premonition of something imminent for hours. It's why he'd been awake to see the Polynesian chick straining on tiptoe for the handle above her head.

That impending sense of change had been at least half of the reason why he had believed her brother wasn't entirely crazy. Colt went back to his seat to wait and see what would happen.

Chapter Six

Death Spiral

I stirred awake again as the plane rattled hard. It shook harder than ever before and I came wide awake as did everyone else with a panicked start. Voices rang out in alarm and a stewardess ran up the aisle towards the cockpit

The plane abruptly gave a hard knock downward worse than any theme park ride. The stewardess flew upward to crash off the ceiling as everyone else was thrown from their seats.

In panic I pulled myself up off the floor to see what was going on. Someone cried out, “She’s dead!”

In horror I looked over to see a man kneeling beside the crumpled body of the stewardess. Other people were hurt as well and screaming in pain as everyone underwent a passage into extreme fear.

The plane started pitching around again and I fell into the aisle. Alarms rang out as emergency lights flashed. All the oxygen masks deployed and dropped down from the ceiling.

I cried out in fear and pulled myself painfully back into my seat.

This was a nightmare!!!

I could feel myself hyperventilating, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. Fumbling my fingers found the seatbelt clasps and I snapped them on.

For the first time I noticed since I'd been awakened that Koke wasn't in the seat beside of me!

“Koke!!!” I screamed out, but my scream was lost in another scream when the plane abruptly fell in altitude.

Why were we falling?

My panicked eyes darted to the window and in shock I saw that the wing was gone! I screamed then like I never had before in my life.

The plane swung drunkenly in a spiraling circle and there was the sound of twisting metal. Abruptly several rows ahead of me there was open sky. The forward sections of the plane had been ripped away!

I couldn't breathe and some part of my oxygen starved brain remembered the oxygen mask dangling before my nose. I

grabbed it and put it on feeling as if I was about to die from fright.

There was another grinding of metal more faint in sound than the first, because of the competing rush of wind within the cabin. The plane swung to the side and dimly I saw the tail section of the plane sail out into the black storm clouds that gripped us.

In shock I felt the freefall of the cabin section I was seated in. It was like an elevator that just wouldn't stop. Black clouds vanished away and I saw the wind tossed surface of the raging ocean below fast approaching.

Incredibly I saw lights in the water below only to then realize that what I was looking at was a cruise ship. The ship was caught up in what looked like a giant whirlpool headed downward like

someone had flushed a giant toilet.

I looked at the descending column of swirling water and it crystallized in my mind instantly that I was on my way to hell. Hell itself was opening up to receive me!

As clear as day Grace's instructions came back to me. I was to ask forgiveness and then do the right thing. I hadn't followed her instructions!

I'd started on the right path, but I hadn't really asked for forgiveness and here I was about to die!

My words were muffled by the oxygen mask as I screamed out in a panic of the spirit, "Oh Jesus I'm sorry! I knew better than to do what I've done! Please forgive me! I don't want to go to hell!"

The waves of the whirlpool were right there and I continued to scream out

horribly in desperation fearing that I was already too late in my plea for forgiveness.

The fuselage hit the waves and my head banged off the window beside me. I dimly saw the crazed lights of the cruise ship in distress descending into the void ahead of us almost vertically.

Water rushed in as darkness closed over my eyes. I moaned at the realization that when I next awoke it would be to find myself already in hell.

I sobbed as I felt my body slammed around in the seat as water splashed everywhere. We just kept falling and falling.

I blinked and then I began to choke as

I spit out water. Stuff was clinging to my face. Blearily I opened my eyes to see a fuzzy image of something.

My prescription contacts were all gummy and I could hardly see anything. They hurt my eyes, but I repetitively blinked anyway despite the pain it caused me.

My vision cleared slightly and my view was immediately one of sand. How was that possible?

I looked beyond the sand and out toward the water where in the distance I saw the fuselage of the plane half in and half out of the water. How had I gotten here to this beach?

I didn't remember wading ashore. The last thing I remembered was the in-rushing water and the feeling of falling through a void.

The sand coming up from the water was churned up, but the track marks were larger than mine would've been. I came up onto my elbows and turned my head to look the other way. The rude man from the plane was sitting there in the sand looking none the worse for wear for the terrifying ordeal we had just come through.

He must've carried me ashore, perhaps even saved my life. That was just great! Now I was indebted to him!

As conscious reality made its way into my foggy senses so did something else. I sat up abruptly as I looked around at the other scattered out survivors along the beach and cried out, "Koke?"

"He's not here."

I swung back around to the big man behind me. There was no cocky

arrogance about him as there had been last night. Genuine sympathy shown from his gray eyes in a level of empathetic emotion I wouldn't have expected from him.

“He's not in the plane either. I saw him get up to go to the bathroom, but they were all full so he headed to the ones at the back of the plane. It couldn't have been, but a couple of minutes later when that freak storm crashed into us.”

I stared at him not really seeing him as tears washed down my face. My head sunk down as I sobbed out on a keening wail, “I've killed my brother! It's all my fault! If I.....”

A big hand rubbed over my back as several fingers brought my chin up, “Hey now! You're jumping to conclusions about your brother being dead! If he was

in the tail section of the plane he stood just as good a chance of surviving as we did. I saw the tail section across from us on the other side of the whirlpool. Your brother could be very much alive!”

I looked at him closely, but I could discern no lie in his eyes or voice. I searched inside myself in the way that twins have a way of doing and I felt no corresponding sense of loss. Koke was alive.

Oh God I hoped so! I'd never forgive myself if something happened to him.

In a tone of concern the man asked, “What’s wrong with your eyes?”

“My contacts are all messed up.” I said, as I pressed my fingers to my burning eyes to stop the pain.

His tone was decidedly grim as he said, “You wear contacts. Please tell me

you have a pair of glasses somewhere?”

“In my bag on the plane, if they’re not busted.”

I’d no sooner said the words than I heard him get up off the sand. Opening my eyes I saw a blurry image of him wading into the sea apparently to fetch my glasses for me. Chivalry wasn’t dead after all.

I closed my eyes as it hurt too much to keep them open. Wiping my fingers free of sand I went ahead and took the contacts out. My eyes felt better immediately, but the sad fact of the matter was that I was something of a bat without my prescription eyewear.

The world around me was blurry and lacked real definition. I sat there helpless.

Vaguely I saw a tall outline separate

out of the waves and come toward me. It was him. I could pick out his large framed form even with the blurriness of my vision.

He'd brought my bag with him and I prayed that my glasses were still intact. I reached for the front flap of the carry-on bag and pulled my glasses out that were thankfully unbroken.

Putting my glasses on I immediately gasped at what I saw.

“What’s wrong with the sky?” I exclaimed in awe.

Looking around I exclaimed further, “Where’s the sun?”

I turned to my nemesis and he shrugged before looking up at the sky himself and saying, “I have a theory.”

I waited impatiently for him to explain further.

He glanced from the sky over to me and said, "I don't think we're on the surface of the planet anymore. I think we've fallen down into an inner world of some kind. Something like that Jules Vern book."

I looked away from him in astonishment at my surroundings.

I drew my knees up to my chest and I hugged them to me as the awful realization that he was right came fully real to me. I'd never see the world above again. I felt sure of it.

Tears came to my eyes as I realized that I wouldn't get the chance to explain myself to my adoptive parents before the incriminating package arrived. In some ways that was the least of my worries now. Where was my brother?

Koke lifted his head off the seat cushion. It was impossible to tell time in this sunken world, but if he had to judge he'd say something like twelve hours had gone by. It felt like he was in a current of some kind, but no land was visible anywhere.

Resolutely he held onto the seat cushion hoping that something positive would occur before he lost the strength to hold onto it or some sea monster came along and took a chomp out of him.

Resting his head back down against the wet cushion he relaxed in the knowledge that at least one thing was a positive. He knew without a doubt that his sister was safe.

That was something, but he hoped

there'd be a salvation of some sort for him to. At twenty-eight he didn't want to cash his chips in just yet. Perhaps his promising career as a surgeon in the finest hospitals on the planet was gone from him, but there was probably ample need for a surgeon in this sunken realm. That is if there were other people here.

He pulled himself up slightly in the water at the sight of something white on the horizon. It was coming towards him. It was the sail of a ship!

Pulling himself up more with one arm he waved repeatedly back and forth with the other arm. Eventually they must've seen something, because the ship diverted from its course and headed towards him.

Koke stopped waving his arm as he was exhausted. As the ship grew closer

his euphoria began to dim as reservations over his rescue began to form.

The ship was reminiscent of a bygone era of sailing. Like the ships that Great Britain and France had battled back and forth against each other with during the Napoleonic era.

This ship wasn't clean rigged like the relics he'd seen on display along a wharf in a historic harbor though. No, it was rougher and patched together looking and the crewmembers gathered at its railing bore a similar resemblance.

Koke swallowed reflexively in alarm. If his speculations were on target he'd say he was about to be rescued by pirates still stuck in the sixteenth century.

“God, surely there could've been

somebody else available than this? How about a great fish like the one that swallowed Jonah. It's not too late yet Lord!" Koke said, as he tried to hold onto his courage as the ship heaved to nearby.

He heard the roar of the crew as the boat drew near. His sister had a protector, but where was his, Koke thought abstractly to himself in question of the Divine motives that had placed him in such a predicament.

Koke lifted his head from the deck and slowly took in the assembled group. Never had he seen a more murderous band of cutthroats than stood before him now. Inner-city street gangs and hard-

core bikers had nothing on these guys.

“Well. Well. Well. Look at what fell from the sky this time.”

Koke's eyes slid away from the tattooed lot of grim and leering faced pirates to the speaker with the hard edged feminine voice. Skintight leather pants rose to a brightly sashed waist, which led up to an expansive chest that had a good bit of it exposed.

The ensemble of the female pirate was topped off with a plumed hat and a face that wasn't attractive in any sort of way. With an easier life perhaps she would've been more attractive looking, as it was though she just gave off an impression of wicked hardness.

Perhaps she was somebody's type, but she wasn't Koke's. He wasn't sure what his type was, but soft and feminine were

two key characteristics that this female pirate lacked in spades.

She motioned and two men grabbed a hold of Koke and held him still as she approached. She ran her tongue over her lips and in a ribald comment said to those gathered, “He’s a sweet one, he is, ain’t he!”

The pirate crew, which it appeared that she was the Captain of, laughed uproariously in dutiful fashion.

Without any warning she reached forward and groped Koke painfully through his pants. Koke jerked in surprise and pain as the pirate Queen turned back to her leering audience with further ribaldry, “Might have to give this one a few rides myself boys before we hand him over to be sliced and made into a pretty slave!”

The crew laughed again and one called out, “Maybe we could warm him up for you Captain Sally?”

Captain Sally mock shushed the roaring crowd of pirates clamoring after what the other one of their number had just said, “Easy now boys! Don’t be agoing and scaring him or he won’t be of any use to me later.”

The pirates laughed all the more harder and Captain Sally joined in with them. Recovering she gave Koke one last hard squeeze before letting go and saying, “I’ll have me pleasure of you later sweet meat, but for now there’s more manna raining down from the clouds above for us to collect. Right boys?”

The crew roared out in approval as they broke up and started making their

way along the ship's rails and up into the rigging to make way with the ship again.

Captain Sally turned back to Koke and pointed an admonishing finger with a jagged dirty nail on it, "You best be ready to please me later pretty boy or I'll do the slavers a favor and slice ye man parts off myself! I has been known to like the taste of man in my stew from time to time, I have. Throw him in the brig with the others."

Koke stared agape at her in horror at the words she had spoken. As he was dragged down a hatchway she called out after him, "Now you laddie bucks stay away from him do you hear me now! Ye can all have a round or two after I've had my fill." More dark laughter rang out in response from the crew.

As Koke was drug further into the

dark foul-smelling interior of the ship he couldn't but see how terribly off in terms of reality modern pop culture was in its romanticism of the age of the pirate. Pirates really were the scum of the earth and if something didn't happen in his favor he was about to be raped by a whole shipload of them.

Chapter Seven

For the Taking

I sat with my back against a tree and watched Colt. Colt Brennan was his name.

I had to admit I at least liked his name. It was strong like he was.

I liked something else about him. Of the entire group of survivors he was the only one that was working.

He was constantly on the move. First he had made endless trips out to the wreckage to search through what was scavenge-able in the plane. At first

several of the other men had gone out with him to the wreckage, but they'd all soon been back, the whole lot of them as white as milk and puking on the beach.

They said the wreckage was a nightmare full of dead bodies that were being eaten on by various monsters that came out of the water. As bad as their reaction to the sight had been Colt neither seemed bothered by the gore or the sea creatures. I pitied the sea monster that tried to grab a hold of him.

I'd overheard enough from the chattering group gathered around the fire that Colt had made by rubbing two sticks together that it had been Colt that had carried or helped most of them ashore.

It hadn't just been me that he'd saved. And yet given all that Colt had done for everyone not one of the group of

chattering magpies had even asked Colt's opinion on any of the plans they were theorizing and voting over like they were an elected Continental Congress.

The one guy that was clearly exhibiting the knowledge and ability to survive wasn't even being considered as a pertinent source of information!

They were idiots and beyond that they were just plain lazy.

I'd asked Colt what I could do and he'd smiled slightly and led me over to this tree where he'd made me sit down. He'd said I had a concussion and that I shouldn't go to sleep. I was sleepy, but dutifully I stayed awake and watched him.

Time to time he glanced over to check on me. I knew he wanted my body, but he was doing more than perhaps many

men would in pursuit of it.

I still wasn't interested in him, but I was intrigued by him. I was also scared of him. He was being Mister Nice Guy right now, but that could change. There were no safeguards of established society to protect me here.

I certainly couldn't count on the protection of any of those by the fire to keep me safe. Half of them were already giving me looks that didn't bode well and as the only surviving female it wasn't hard to figure out what they had in mind.

It sounded strange, but Colt could perhaps offer me the most safety of anyone. That wasn't an option I was going to consider at the moment though. Not till I had to anyway.

It was weird to consider, but if being

taken advantage of was inevitable I preferred it be him as opposed to any of the others.

My thoughts troubled me and I tried to push them aside and focus in on just watching Colt be busy about the camp.

A couple of things occurred to me about him. It was apparent that Colt was a loner. I doubted that he did very well in a team like atmosphere, as he was too dominant and controlling for that.

He'd just finished putting up a lean-to shelter and gotten fresh water from somewhere. The man seemed to have boundless energy. He wore me out just looking at him.

“Kim?”

My eyes had drifted shut and I jerked them open as I sat up a bit. I hadn't meant to fall asleep. Was I in trouble?

I glanced at his face to see that little smile was there again.

"It's probably all right for you to sleep now. Here I brought you a cushion."

He gestured to a cushion lying on the sand before me and I mumbled 'thank you' before I collapsed my head onto it. There were at least some perks to being highly sought after.

Colt shook his head slightly still smiling. She'd gone asleep the instant her head hit the cushion.

He glanced up from her to the pack of

fools discussing what should be done over by the fire. There was nothing to do but survive.

Colt sat down on the sand beside Kim. He was very tired and yet he held himself awake because he'd seen some of the glances directed at Kim from the others. It didn't take lawlessness long to form in the heart of man in the absence of societal oversight.

In such a lawless state as there now existed only strength could be respected. He was making just such a statement even now by remaining beside Kim's side. She was his and nobody else's. Her brother hadn't been so crazy about everything radically changing after all.

Colt glanced up at the orange glowing sky of drifting cloud cover overhead. He couldn't understand yet alone

comprehend, how any of this was possible, but it was. Falling through the world to land on another world certainly constituted a radical change, so did having a woman in his life.

Not just any woman, but one that he had promised to protect. He'd gotten pretty lucky all things considered. She was gorgeous and she wasn't a small minded loser like the group of men over by the fire.

The idiots gathered in deep discussion around the fire didn't even know why he had built the fire. Instinctively he'd known that they would congregate around it foolishly.

What need was there of a fire in such a warm climate, but they hadn't bothered themselves to ask that.

The only thing a fire was good for

was to attract attention. If there was some form of threat down here be it from the animal or human kind in this sunken realm, those by the fire were most likely to be attacked first.

The idiots by the fire were bait meant to buy the time needed in a diversion in order for him and Kim to escape if need be. Yes, it was brutal and uncaring of him to set them up perhaps, but it was an effective means by which to survive.

In all fairness he hadn't been going to make the fire originally, but the ringleader of the group had ticked him off by his condescending attitude toward him. The man was a former Army Captain and when he'd inquired of Colt about his suspicion of Colt's military background, Colt had confirmed his time spent as a Marine with the rank of

Sergeant.

That had been all that it took. The Captain had immediately looked down his aquiline nose at him and ordered him to go out and salvage supplies from the wreckage of the plane.

Colt had gone, but not because he'd been ordered to. He'd been planning on going anyway to look for supplies.

Most of what he'd brought back he'd dumped in a pile near the fire, while the others had talked and pigged out on what little usable food he'd managed to find in the wreckage. Without them noticing he'd rummaged through the supplies and picked out most of the handy devices and secured them away in a pack that now sat beside of him in the sand. The most namely device being the air marshal's handgun, along with a flare gun.

He'd overheard enough of the discussion going on over by the fire to deduce that after some sleep they planned to start out along the beach in search of human habitation. They intended to walk right out in the open along the beach!

Colt shook his head, the Captain should have known better. Another strange occurrence in this sunken world was that the water directly offshore was freshwater. Out where the plane wreckage was the water got more brackish and salty, but in close to the beach the water was pure drinking quality.

The freshwater along the shore meant that everything had to come to the shore to drink, which made the beachfront a place of likely confrontation with the

creatures of this place. Having seen firsthand some of the creatures gnawing on the dead remains within the plane's fuselage had left him with little desire to see what other creatures this place may yet hold.

The beach was the last place that he wanted to be!

As eager as he was to leave he had to wait for those over by the fire to fall asleep before he and Kim could slip away.

He glanced down at Kim. She was as beautiful as the lush tropical petals of a rare flower in full bloom. The glasses perched on her nose only added a level of cuteness to her that was unexpected, even as it was sexy.

Gently he grasped the rims of the glasses and slipped them off her face so

they didn't press into her face as she slept. Looking at her now, as she slept, he felt a level of protectiveness sweep over him as he had never felt before for another human being.

He'd keep her safe. He'd make her his woman too, but that would come later. Right now he had to focus on just keeping them both alive.

Tiredly he let his eyes close as he leaned back against a tree along the forested edge of the beach. He drifted into the realm of restful unconsciousness, but his battle tested senses of perception never really went to sleep. He was asleep, with one eye open so to speak.

I blinked my eyes open. Oh no, where were my glasses?

I relaxed as my fingers found them folded on the cushion before me. I slipped them on and took in my surroundings.

It never seemed to get dark here. It was always this hazy orange glow.

It was impossible to tell what time it was, but instinctively I knew that several hours had gone by since I had been last awake. Then in a panic stricken moment I realized that Colt was gone!

I abruptly sat up and was about to call out, when a big hand closed over my mouth and I was drug bodily backward into the jungle vegetation behind me. I was about to let an elbow loose into my unknown captor, when I smelled him and sensed who it was that held me.

Not sure why, I felt myself relax in the knowledge that it was Colt who held me. His face came into view as his fingers came away from my mouth. There was such a sense of expectant wariness about him that I didn't dare speak.

My skin prickled with sensation, as a chill swept through me, as I wondered vainly at what my city noise conditioned senses were missing out on. One finger came up to his lips and I nodded in silence.

His hand reached out and pressed my glasses more firmly onto my face. It was an odd gesture and I wasn't prepared for his further contact of me, when he leaned in close and whispered directly against my ear, "Follow me if you want to live."

I swallowed convulsively, as he abruptly moved off into the jungle

staying low and looking very much as if he knew what he was doing.

What about the others?

If there was danger we couldn't just leave them un-alerted to it could we?

Shouts rang out from the beach and I popped my head up ever so slightly to look towards the sound of the commotion. I'd expected to see some version of a monster ripping into those gathered about the fire, and I was surprised to see otherwise.

My hand flew to my mouth in shock as I watched the former Army Captain's head lopped off by the downward swing of a cutlass.

Pirates!

Oh God!

I scuttled backward into the jungle vegetation, until I thought it was safe to

get to my feet. I ran in a panic to catch up with wherever Colt had gotten off too. I didn't want to be alone out here.

My bare foot landed on a rock and I tumbled into the undergrowth with a cry of pain. There was no time for pain though and I got back up to my feet and gingerly took a step forward. I grimaced, but the pain was manageable and I took another step.

Somewhere between the plane and the beach I had lost my flats. What I wouldn't give for some form of shoe wear right now. The only shoes I knew of in existence though right now were the sandals in my bag and the last time I'd seen my bag it had been slung over Colt's shoulder as he had headed off into the jungle.

I was a good distance from the beach

now and the sounds of chaos taking place there couldn't be heard any longer. I was alone in the jungle. As a girl I had run free in a jungle remarkably similar to this one, but that had been a long time ago and a lot had changed since then.

I was used to getting my caramel latte and idly strolling down a hard paved street to get to work situated in a high-rise among the many in the city. I had been born into this environment, but it was now alien to me and there were pirates here, who even now might be following my trail.

Something rustled in the brush off to my right and I sucked in my breath in fright. My heart was going a million beats a second at the unknown.

The brush moved again and on a panicked note I called out, "Colt?"

The rustling stopped and then there was movement towards me. It wasn't Colt. Instead it was some version of a tiger sized leopard that I doubted still existed on the surface of the planet.

My heart froze within me and I stood as still as a statue as it came towards me. It would do no good to run, but the nerve to remain still was vanishing quickly.

“Stay still!” Came the hissed out command from nearby.

In relief my eyes drifted over to see Colt standing not ten feet away from me. The big cat had stopped at the voice and the appearance of the second individual.

The big cat looked undecided as to what it wanted to do. It had a sour look to it as it hissed heavily at us disgruntled.

Colt's big hand curled around my waist and I went willingly as he pulled me behind him. A sense of secure peace occurred then as I pressed up against his back as he stared down the big cat that probably weighed as much as both of us put together and more.

Peering around Colt's side I saw the big cat toss its head disgustedly before it ambled leisurely off into the jungle. I breathed a little more freely after I saw its tail retreat from view.

Colt turned to me and I found that I couldn't meet his eyes.

I brushed at my hair and stepping back I winced, which he immediately noticed. A hand closed over my shoulder and I found myself sitting on the ground with my foot grasped in both of his hands before I knew it.

His unexpected touch was startling!

He looked from my foot down to me and all the warning I had of his intentions was a cryptic, “You can’t walk on this.”

He stooped down and his hands settled around my waist and he rose back up abruptly and I found myself draped over his shoulder. I’d never in all my adult life been so manhandled before!

“Hey! Let me down! You can’t.....”

Smack!

I jumped in startlement at the smarting contact of his hand with my bottom.

“Pipe down or I’ll give you another one.” Came his correspondingly terse comment.

In fury I drew my elbow back to smash it into the location of one of his

kidneys off to the side of his spine. I thought twice about my action though, when his palm suggestively cupped over the other cheek of my bottom, as he made his way through the jungle.

The message was clear. I hit him and I'd get one back myself.

I had no desire to experience the stinging burn again that half my bottom had already suffered. I let my drawn back elbow relax, as I endured the embarrassment of my situation.

"I hate you!" I said meaningfully and then unable to help myself I elbowed him hard in the kidney.

He grunted sharply and almost came to a stop. He went on though and his hand as I knew it would gave me the promised retribution I'd been expecting, only it was a lot harder than the first

time had been.

Tears came to my eyes and I bit my lip hard before I savagely said, “I really hate you now!”

“Duly noted, now shut up or do you want another one?”

I shut up as his hand drifted back to the other side. A moment went by as I experienced extreme frustration at the hopelessness of my situation.

Finally I couldn't stand it anymore and I whispered out fiercely against his back, “Why don't you just tie me up and get it over with! I know you want me! You stinking coward! You think you're so tough beating up on a woman! Go ahead and show me how tough you are! I hate you! I hate all men, but I especially hate you!”

“Would you just shut up already!”

Came the unperturbed voice of the man that held me captive.

More tears fell as I hung limply over this man's shoulder. I wasn't ready for this interaction with a male business. He was both my savior and my tormentor.

Could God really be so cruel as to throw me into a situation like this where intimacy was assured to take place with someone that I detested?

I was scared and alone with a man in the jungle that I fully knew intended to make me his Eve at some point. Meanwhile my brother was out there, God knew where, perhaps injured or even now in the process of dying!

A package I couldn't stop now would arrive to break the hearts of my adoptive parents and where was I in all this?

Slung over the shoulder of a caveman

that should've gone out with the dinosaurs!

In a sheer cry of frustration I drove my other elbow into his other kidney. Again he grunted painfully, but I was too caught up in cringing at the expected pain of his next smack to take enjoyment of the pain that I had caused him.

The smack didn't come.

He'd stopped and was breathing heavily. Oh no this was going to be bad!

I'd pushed him too far!

I instantly regretted my impulsive attempts to hurt him. I was the one that stood the most to lose in any confrontation between us.

His voice had a pained note to it as he said, "You have quite the temper don't you?"

"Yes." I admitted feeling a little

relieved at the normality of his tone of voice.

He nodded briefly before saying, “Don’t get me wrong baby, I like that you have spunk, but you’d be best served to not practice anymore of it on me!”

“What would you do?” I asked unable to help myself.

“I’ll set you down on your bare feet on this rough terrain and let the open wound on your foot come in contact with all the bacteria and who knows what else this sunken land is harboring. Is that what you want Princess? Do you want to see your foot rot and have to have it cut off?”

“No.” I said biting my lip, as I realized what a fool I had made of myself.

What he was saying was the truth. I

wouldn't have been able to keep up with him on my own anyway and I very well may have fallen victim to pirates lagging behind. Instinctively I knew that was a far worse fate to be considered than whatever Colt might require of me.

Colt started out again and it wasn't long before he was breathing heavy again. It was hard work carrying me and the two packs that he had slung on his other shoulder uphill as he was.

"I'm sorry." I said softly against his back.

He stopped and leaned one shoulder against a tree for a moment and huffed out, "Me too. I smacked you too hard that last time."

I blinked slowly in realization of what he was apologizing for. Then again as I realized that he was actually apologizing

for something. Strangely the stinging burn I was feeling on the posterior end and the resentful anger that it had inspired went away.

“I was wrong about you.” I said softly, as he started out walking again.

There was a wry note to his voice as he asked, “Oh and how’s that?”

I was way out on a limb here, but I stuttered out my thought in hopes that I was right, “I don’t think you’re the type to force yourself on an unwilling woman.”

He snorted derisively in response, which had me wondering if I was right.

“I’m right though, aren’t I?” I asked more hesitantly than I wanted to.

There was a sour note to his voice as he said, “I should’ve gagged you.”

“Why?” I asked curiously, but he

didn't answer. He just kept trudging on through the thick vegetation holding me firmly in place over his shoulder.

I hoped I was right, but when it came to this caveman there was very little that I could be sure of, as he didn't fit the mold that most men I had met were made by.

Koke looked around, but there was little to be seen in the stale darkness of the ship's hold. While there was little to be seen there was a lot to be heard.

Miserably Koke listened to the muttered prayers, wails of grief, and pained groans from those held within the hold of the ship. From what little coherent conversation he'd managed to

elicit from the group held within the ship's hold he'd discovered that none of them were from the plane.

Instead as incredible as it was they all claimed to have arrived here to this sunken realm via a luxury cruise liner. They had all been busy enjoying their vacations, when their voyage had taken a hellish turn for the worse.

Besides him there were fifteen others in the hold. There had been some others, but the Pirates had come for them a while back and those taken had not returned.

Those in the hold though had heard their screams. Koke could well imagine what their grisly fates had been.

Koke considered himself to be a peaceable man, who got along well with his fellow man. He had believed in the

criminal justice system in regards to equal representation before the law, but that was in the past. Right now he wanted these pirates dead!

Anybody who could perpetrate such crimes against humanity deserved nothing but death. He was scared. What man wouldn't be in his predicament?

The scene that awaited him made the infamous prison shower scene pale in comparison in terms of harsh treatment. He wasn't submitting to that tortured future quietly.

Vainly he searched around in the dark for something to help him make a good account of himself when the time came. He found nothing of use and quite a few times he'd drawn back in revulsion upon touching the remains of some bygone rotting individual.

Defeated he leaned up against one of the dry rotted sides of the ship's hold, as cold murky water swished about his ankles.

“God?”

A moment passed before he asked out softly again in question, “God?”

“Why?”

Still there was no answer and a quiver of anguish swept through him and in desperation he said, “I need help! I.....don't want what's going to happen..... to happen.”

Koke shook his head, before saying with a hint of bitterness, “Thy will be done. God help me!”

Koke slid down against the side of the hull in the smelly dungeon. His hand fell on something. He fingered it in the darkness as to ascertain what it was. It

was a bone.

Koke fought against revulsion for what he held. He felt the bone out carefully in the dark. The bone was a small broken off fragment with one round end and one jaggedly sharp end. It wasn't much, but it was something. What was he going to do with it?

It was too small to really hold it in the grip of his hand and if he tried to lash out with it he'd be hacked to pieces in seconds. He swallowed as an idea occurred to him.

Koke reached up and wiped at the cold sweat on his brow. His plan could work given what he knew of these pirates, but it was humiliating even to consider.

His jaw firmed and his grip tightened on the small bone fragment. Survival.

Survival was what it was all about now.

He was going to survive to find his sister!

He only hoped that her predicament was better than his right now. He thought of the tough soldier type that he had passed his sister off onto.

A brief smile touched his lips. She was safe all right. Vainly though he wished that he was more of a confident warrior type like Colt, but he'd have to do with whatever he could nerve up in terms of courage.

As someone once said courage isn't the absence of fear, but rather the management of it.

Chapter Eight

Mysteries of the Sea

Colt was still breathing heavy as he knelt before me cleaning the wound on my foot with water from a nearby spring. Perspiration was literally dripping down his face and his shirt was soaked. Despite the evident signs of extreme exertion his touch on my foot was gentle.

The wound itself wasn't all that bad, but left untreated it could become bad. I looked back down the way we had come up through the jungle and acknowledged that there were few men that could

compare with the man I'd inadvertently become matched up with in terms of strength and endurance.

He finished cleaning up my wound by pressing some crumpled up leaves of a plant that I remembered from my childhood onto the wound. He pulled a rag out and wrapped my foot tightly with it.

He glanced away to a still higher promontory further up the slope from us and then glancing back at me said, "You're not going to be able to walk barefoot in these rocks, but your foot should heal up well."

He glanced back to his destination in mind and I knew he was contemplating as to what it would be like to carry me any further. He looked tired and I had a terrible secret. I'd completely forgotten

about the pair of sandals in my pack, but I was quite sure that divulging that secret now could get my neck wrung.

I shifted uneasily on the boulder that I sat on for more than one reason.

His eyes shifted back to me as he caught sight of my shifting motion. Surprisingly I watched a look of something that almost looked like shame fleetingly cross across his strong features.

He rubbed the palm of his hand reflexively as he looked away again and said, "Sorry. Sometimes I forget how strong I am and how soft a woman can be."

I was touched by his apology, even as I was affronted by it. Soft! He made me sound weak and helpless!

Admittedly in comparison to him I

was weak and helpless. It rankled heavily to have to admit that.

He started to reach for me to no doubt sling me back over his shoulder again, but I quickly held up my hands forestalling such an action. My head was already throbbing from being hung upside down and I'd quite had my fill of being carried about caveman style.

"I..... I....." I stuttered to frame the words of my secret.

His gaze turned curious, "You what?"

In a rush I spit out, "I have a pair of sandals in my bag."

My eyes closed as I waited for his fingers to clamp around my neck. Time stretched out and I peeked out to see him shaking his head as he gazed down the steep pathway that he'd carried me up.

Hurriedly I said, "I forgot! I'm sorry!"

He glanced back to me and surprisingly he didn't seem overly angry. He seemed to come to some consensus of thought by issuing forth a one word statement, "Women!"

In umbrage I sat up, "What's that supposed to mean?"

He snorted derisively and turned away to my bag which he drug closer to him. He started to open it and I quickly came half off my seat as I reached for my carry-on bag.

It was the only luggage I'd had, as I had thought it best to pack light, but reversely I'd packed the small bag to the point that the seams were about to bust. I didn't want him rummaging through my stuff. Everything was where it was for a purpose.

His hand smacked my outreaching

fingers away.

“But.....”

He held one decisive finger up cutting my protest off. I swallowed my words at the look in his hard gray eyes. He spoke, “I have already carried far more weight than needed and you’re going to be doing well just to manage yourself. We have a lot of distance to cover and we don’t need excess baggage to cart along!”

I wanted to protest, but my words remained unsaid.

He glanced back to the bag and opened it and promptly all of its contents spewed out. I couldn’t take it and looked away from the scene. I felt completely violated by his handling of my stuff.

“You have good taste.” He said in a thoughtful tone.

I glanced back to see him picking his

way through my bag's contents and unable to resist I said, "You don't strike me as a man that's overly fashion conscious."

He glanced up and flatly said, "I'm not, but I can appreciate a well-dressed woman."

I swallowed and nodded, as I retreated into silence. He liked my style. Enough said.

He was busy making two piles. One small the other large. I got the distinct impression that the large pile was staying behind. I had to fight to hold back my objections more than once as more and more was added to the larger pile.

He held up a bra in apparent contemplation over something. He picked up the other bra that the pack

contained and looking between the two began to look slightly strained. He glanced at me then, but not at my face but rather down to where the articles of clothing he held were meant to be applied. This was so humiliating!

Subconsciously I crossed my arms across my chest as I met his considering gaze with my best look of affront. It didn't faze him in the slightest. Instead he winked at me and tossed both bras on the small pile.

There was an unsaid statement of intent in that action. He wanted to see both on me.

Mutinously my eyes met his as my face burned with indignation, "I'm not doing anything for or with you! So keep dreaming jerk!"

He carried on as if I hadn't spoken as

he tossed the accompanying boyshorts onto the small pile.

“You’re not in a position to say anything as to what occurs between us.” He said deeply as he stared at me for a long moment to let his point drive home.

He continued on then through the rest of the bag throwing most of the remainder on the big pile. The last thing he came to was my makeup bag and I gave an inadvertent nervous start as I remembered something. Before I could stop it a single word slipped out, “Don’t!”

He glanced up interested, but continued on. Surprisingly he pulled quite a few items free of the bag only to toss them onto the small pile. Then he came to the small cylinder tucked under some makeup jars. I looked the other

way. It was my vibrator.

I felt like a coward for my bashfulness and so I looked back at him ready to do battle. The device looked small against the palm of his hand. He looked contemplative again. He flipped it through the air to land on the small pile.

I leaned forward and snatching the vibrator up I chucked it out into the jungle as hard as I could throw it.

His only response was a noncommittal shrug, as if it had been no big deal to him one way or the other. It was a big deal to me though!

I stood up and savagely said, "I'm not your woman! Me being out here alone with you doesn't give you any right over me! I want nothing to do with you! In fact I hate you!"

"I picked up on that somewhat

already.” He said wryly.

He picked out a pair of jeans, a tank top, and one of the sets of underwear and held them out to me, “Get changed Kim.”

He stood up and turned to leave, surprising me in the fact that he wasn’t going to ask me to strip down before him. As I stared at his back, tears of angry frustration spilled out of my eyes and into my emotionally charged voice as I said, “Don’t you care what I think?”

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder, “No I don’t. In fact there’s not much that I do care about in life. However, I think I could learn to care about you Kim. Get changed. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

I watched him disappear and bitterly I glanced down at the clothes in my hand. Resignedly I took my clothes off and got

dressed. There was nothing to do it seemed, but please the man.

He was back a few minutes later as he'd promised and I didn't miss the approving way his eyes drifted over me. He added my small pile to his pack and we started out again.

At the edge of the clearing he picked something up that had been resting against a tree. It was a crude walking stick of sorts and he handed it to me. Grateful for the extra support on the uneven terrain I took it from him.

I stared at his back as he continued on. The walking stick had been thoughtful of him.

What manner of man was he?

He denied the value of my expressed thoughts, but he thoughtfully cared for my needs. Sooner or later I'd find out what

manner of man he was, but in my mind there was little to be found in that likely occurrence as being positive.

Koke was jarred awake at the jangle of keys. Instinctively he knew his time had come and he did what little he could to prepare.

A lantern was thrust into the murky hold and those gathered there drew back in fear from the big burly pirate who had entered the scene. He leered about at the cowering individuals before spying Koke and saying, "Times up matey. The Captain ah be wanting yuh to warm her up."

The pirate bellowed out in laughter before continuing on with, "Cold Sally

is what we'ze calls her. Never get enough can she." His hand closed over Koke's manacled hands and he jerked him along to follow him out of the ship's hold.

Koke went along without protest. They made their way through the ship and Koke on a fake stumble managed to get ahead of the pirate. He walked along the corridor ahead of the pirate feeling the other man's lascivious gaze upon him.

"Dats it! I'ze gonna have some first!" The pirate exclaimed in lustful fervor.

Koke found himself abruptly shoved forward and folded over the top of a nearby barrel. The pirate glanced around furtively for a moment before shoving Koke's pants down.

Koke gripped the barrel hard as he put

up no fight against what was to come. The pirate's own pants fell as he stepped up behind Koke. He lunged forward with a triumphant cackle.

The cackle abruptly turned to a screamed exclamation of pain. The pirate stumbled backward from Koke clutching at his bleeding member in shock.

Koke wasted no time as he turned and stooped down to pick up the pirate's dropped cutlass. He raised it high and the pirate's panicked eyes rose to Koke as he caught sight of the upraised blade in the dim light given off by the lantern on the floor. His cry for help was abruptly cut off as the cutlass came down again and again.

Shaking with the release of the nerved up tension that had just been released

Koke stepped back from the hacked up corpse on the floor. He laid the cutlass down on a barrel top and removed the protruding jagged piece of bone with a sigh of relief from his rear. He pulled his pants back up and took stock of the situation.

The pirate's cut off scream for help had failed to bring anyone to investigate. Koke reached down and pulled the key ring wet with blood from the pirate's belt. Quickly he went through the rusty keys until he found the one that unlocked his manacles, as they fell free of this chaffed wrists and upsurgent wave of hope flooded into him.

He'd take his chances in the water as opposed to this ship's motley crew of cutthroat undesirables. His foot was on the rung of the ladder that led topside

before his consciousness overtook him.

He glanced back to the hold. He couldn't just leave them to the same fate that he'd just narrowly averted himself.

Koke made his way back the way the pirate had brought him quickly. The people stood up with a hopeful murmur at his appearance.

“Shhhh!” Was all he said as he fit the key into the lock.

The rusty bars opened with a squeak and Koke turned back the way he had come as the others followed along in silence after him. Cautiously he made his way up the ladder.

The ladder went past another interior deck that was full of pirates. They were all snoring away in a drunken stupor, at least Koke hoped so as one by one the fearful people made their way up past

the intervening deck.

Koke eased up onto the main deck and quickly glanced around. Pirates were slumped here and there all along the ship's deck, but none appeared to be conscious. He stood up and walked confidently over to the ship's railing as if he belonged to the scene and wasn't a captive in the process of leading an escape attempt.

The others quickly joined him somewhat less confidently as they peered around at the sleeping pirates in fear. Koke motioned to the tied off rowboat and started helping the others into it. He and another man undid the ropes to either side that led up to the winches.

With a protesting creak of the pulleys the boat began to lower over the side.

Both Koke and the other man glanced around furtively for any sign of stirring pirates, but they snored on dead to the world.

The boat touched the water with a louder splat of sound than either man had intended. None of the sleeping pirates stirred though.

Those in the boat below cast off the ropes and immediately started rowing away from the pirate galley. Koke and his helper stared in shock at the betrayal of them by the others. Both men were going to have to dive for it to catch up with the boat.

“Where’s my boy stud!” Came a drunken shout.

It was Sally the Captain and she saw both men at virtually the same moment as they saw her.

“Get them!!!” Captain Sally screamed out in fury.

Koke’s helper jumped up onto the ship’s railing to dive overboard, only to pitch over the side with a cry of pain. A cutlass was stuck fast in his back from where a pirate had thrown it overhand.

Koke flipped over the railing, but was hung up from dropping to the water as a knife transixed his hand to the ship’s railing. Crying out in the pain it caused him Koke yanked the knife free, but before he could drop to the water rough hands seized him and the edge of a rusty cutlass was held against his throat by none other than an enraged Captain Sally.

Her face was a caricature of a human in that moment that appeared more skeleton than it did flesh and blood.

“Not so fast loverboy! I’ze gonna have your hide for this!”

Koke struggled against the hold on him that was dragging him back on board. In his struggle to be free he caught sight of the fleeing rowboat. The layers of civility gained from a life in the social graces of a polite society disintegrated as he yelled out at the departing boat, “I curse you cowards for this!”

It took several pirates to stifle Koke’s adrenalinized attempt to be free, but in the end he was pulled back on board.

Captain Sally in a crazed manner turned to a gunnery crew, “Billy light’em up!”

Several seconds later a cannon reared back on its pins as it belched flame and smoke. The rowboat in the distance

along with its occupants disintegrated into fragments as the well-placed shot blew it up.

Captain Sally was back in Koke's face in an instant. Her spit landed on his face as she spoke out loudly, "Now I has just the likes of you to play with sugar boy! Tie him to the mast! I'll have the flesh off of him for this! Fetch me the cat-a'nines!

Koke was jerked forward by a knot of pirates, who looked cowed by the insane fury of their leader. Within seconds Koke found himself tied off to the ship's mainmast.

The bindings of the rope were beyond tight. He more or less sensed that Captain Sally was behind him and the knowledge of that caused him to tense up in anticipation of what he knew was to

come. It was like a pirate movie he'd watched as a kid, only this was reality.

There was a sharp crack of the whip and Koke screamed out in agony as the individual strands of the whip each capped with a jagged metal barb chewed into his back and shoulders.

“Scream boy! I'm gonna paint my ship red with your blood!” Stormed out the vengeful Captain Sally.

She flailed away with the cat-a'nine tails mercilessly. Koke's back turned red along with his legs and where the metal jagged pieces wrapped around to his front.

Koke was in a realm beyond agony as he sobbed against the pole that in his pain he had bitten a chunk out of.

The strikes of the whip stopped.

In his agony Koke noticed that the

congregated pirates were gone. Where were they?

Surely they weren't lining up to rape him. Laughing hysterically he turned his head to confirm his fate, but the pirates weren't even focused on him. They were all gathered at the ship's railing looking out to sea.

Captain Sally was yelling out something and Koke tried to keep a hold of consciousness in order to figure out whether or not help was coming. He already felt dead in some ways.

“Get the sails out you scally wags! Well what are you waiting for? Do you want to be blown to bits! Weigh anchor!”

“What do you want done with him?”
Came a pirate's voice from the mob.

“Throw him over the side for shark

bait. Get moving!”

The tight bonds holding Koke to the mainmast were slashed and Koke slumped in a bloody heap to the deck. He was unceremoniously drug across the deck then. Something was wrapped around his ankles and then rough hands sent him flying.

Downward he fell with a hard smack into the water. Contact with the water charged him to semi consciousness and reflexively he gasped for air before he was pulled down by something heavy.

Invigorated by the water and a chance at escape he vainly waved his arms, but it did no good as he continued to sink. He glanced down to see a ball and chain looped about his ankles. He wasn't going to make it. All this effort to survive and he was still going to die!

Bitterly he watched the sea floor approach. Moments later he was mired in a wash of stirred up sediment as the ball and chain clanged into the ocean floor. The sediment cleared and he looked around at the surrounding coral reefs and exotic fish species that were in abundant display.

There were worse places to die other than this he thought abstractly to himself. He choked with the vital need to receive more oxygen.

Dazedly he glanced at the crystalline water around him and noticed that there was a red tinge to it. It was his blood. He was putting out and all beacons alert to every shark and sea monster in the area. He'd rather drown than feel himself being fed upon, but his mouth remained closed.

He saw a shadow of an approaching shark and then he saw her. Koke blinked his eyes. He had to be dreaming. Lack of oxygen, that had to be it, as nothing else made sense.

She was moving toward him then and somehow the shark was leaving. Was any of this real?

It really didn't matter anymore because he couldn't hold his breath any longer. Her fingers touched his face and he opened his eyes to see her right there before him as her long blonde hair clouded around him in the water.

Oh darn what a terrible time to die!

His mouth opened hopelessly and to his surprise her lips closed over his and somehow he was breathing and drowning all at the same time. Somehow drowning didn't seem to matter as

kissing this woman come from the realms of heavenly fantasy was a dream come true.

Surely this wasn't allowed in heaven, but the kiss went on and on and he lost track of time. Who knew this was what heaven was like was his last conscious thought.

Chapter Nine

Forbidden Fruit

I was tired, but I was on edge to, which helped hold back the weariness that I felt. We'd entered a thickly overgrown patch of jungle and the dense shade had grown oppressively dark. Soon we would be stopping. Stopping meant.....

I glanced ahead at Colt's broad back and felt a shiver course throughout me.

Nervous anxiety threatened to overwhelm me. I couldn't! I wouldn't!

I had to find a way to escape. I'd be

better off on my own than trapped as this man's sensual playmate. He may think I was his Eve, but I wasn't!

Now the question was how did one give a former Marine Sergeant the slip?

About the only thing that came to mind was hitting him over the head with a stick. However tempting that option was I disregarded it.

For starters I doubted I'd get close enough undetected to pull it off. Secondly I'd have to really hit him hard and doing so might kill him. I wasn't a murderer.

All my self-reasoning left me back at square one as to what to do. Whatever it was I'd have to do it quick, as I doubted that he was going on much farther today before making camp.

Something bumped into my shoulder

and idly I saw it was a branch heavy laden with fruit. Uneaten fruit.

It all came back to me then. I knew what this fruit was and better yet what it was capable of.

“Hey keep up there. We’ll be camping soon.”

My response came quickly and I only hoped that he didn’t think it was too quick, “I just thought we could augment our supplies with some of this fruit. I was going to pick some of them if it’s all right with you?”

I saw him squint in concentration at the fruit hanging by my head.

“You know what kind of fruit that is?” He asked uncertainly.

“Yeah I used to eat it all the time growing up.” The lying words came easily, but I was so going to hell!

He shrugged, “Pick it then. Good thinking Kim.”

He waited patiently while I picked several of the more ripe pieces of fruit. It was my greatest acting performance to date, pulling off my plan under his watchful gaze. I wasn't yet sure if he was clueless about the fruit or if he knew what the fruit was and was just playing along to see how far I'd go.

I hurried up to where he was standing and it wasn't much longer before we stopped and made camp. Now all I had to do was to get him to try the fruit without doing so myself.

Turns out it wasn't a factor. Colt had no sooner made a fire and set up some comfortable looking beds out of branches and foliage from some nearby bushes that he relaxed back against a

boulder and bit out a big chunk of one of the fruits that I had picked.

I glanced at the two beds mildly shocked. It wasn't what I had been expecting of him to do. It almost made me feel sorry for what I had done.

Nervously I sat down opposite of him and fingered one of the fruits in my hand. The burden to speak was too great and I found myself biting my lip until blood ran.

He glanced over at me curiously, "What's the matter with you? Aren't you eating? You have to be hungry. These are quite good." He said, as he tossed the pit of the fruit into the fire.

He'd eaten the whole thing!

Oh God I hoped he didn't die!

Suddenly a facial muscle began to tick sporadically on his face and he put a

hand to his stomach unsteadily. I let the fruit that I held fall from my fingers and roll into the fire.

Blinking rapidly he looked up from the fruit that was sizzling in the flames to me and I confessed, “I’m sorry, but I..... don’t want to be your woman.”

I stood up as emotional consternation played out across his features. His voice was slurred as he made a grab for my ankle, “You little.....” He never finished his thought as he passed out and fell forward.

His hand reaching for my ankle fell into the fire and with a gasp I jerked his hand free of the flames. The unpleasant odor of burnt hair stung my nose. Tears slipped free and ran down my face at the realization that in addition to knocking the man out into a hallucinogenic sleep

that he may not come out of I'd also caused him bodily injury.

He'd made two beds!

This man had pulled me from a plane and then saved me from pirates!

His hand didn't looked bad other than that it was now hairless unlike the rest of him. I was a wretched excuse of an individual to have treated another person like this!

"For pity sakes Kim he made two beds!" I screamed out in frustration at myself.

I had been scared and I had acted out of fear. Maybe I'd had a right to be afraid, but he'd done nothing to warrant what I had done to him.

I felt for his pulse. It was strong and racing. He was sweating like crazy!

Oh God he would kill me when he

woke up!

If he woke up.

Colt was lying on his front and the gun he had was tucked into the waistband of his pants at the small of his back. I pulled the gun out and before I could give my consciousness a moment to decide otherwise I stood up and fled the scene.

I didn't really have a plan other than to survive and find Koke.

It was a different feeling now as I ran out into the jungle. I didn't feel safe anymore. The gun clutched in my hand gave me a measure of security, but my real security lay back there by the fire.

I was such a fool! My chances of surviving on my own were next to nothing now, but it was too late to go

back now.

Colt twitched and shook as he was held in the grip of a vision from the past that had crossed over into a nightmarish fantasy jacked on steroids.

Smoke, lots of smoke.

Blood on the walls.

His buddies all blown apart.

Dead sightless eyes.

“Why weren’t you here with us Colt? You could’ve gone with us. It would’ve all been over. See you in hell soon. You know that’s where we are. You remember don’t you? It was your order that called in the artillery strike. It was you that killed all these people. You’re going to hell. Can’t you see all those

you killed watching you? You deserve to die. There's nothing good about you. You're going to die. We hate you because you're still alive. Should've been here with us. We were a team, but now you're alone. Traitor to everything. Just die. We'll keep the fire hot just for you. See you soon bro. See you soon. You're gonna burn!"

“No!!!” Colt screamed into the ground even as his fingers dug into it as he tried to pull himself free of the nightmarish realm he had been falling through.

He raised his head blearily and looked around. The little witch who'd poisoned him was gone.

The fire was dead, which meant that hours had gone by.

Oh God his head hurt and nothing seemed to be working quite right. He

fumbled for his gun, but it was gone. She'd taken it of course, but she hadn't taken the pack. The stupid little fool!

He pushed himself upright on the ground and looked at his hand. He almost swore, but bit it back. His hand stung, but it was otherwise fine.

He got to his feet and reeled about drunkenly for a moment. It didn't take him long to see the way that she'd gone. She'd only continued in her foolishness in heading off in the direction that she had chosen. She'd headed down into a valley.

Colt hadn't told her, but there were monsters on this island. Monsters that likely ate meat. As long as they stayed in the rough terrain along the ridge lines they weren't likely to run into anything, but down in the sheltered valleys would

be a different story.

She may have his gun, but he still had the flare gun and the pack. She'd made her own bed and she could sleep in it for good for all he cared.

Colt slung the pack on and headed out across the ridge. Part of the hallucinogenic episode of a nightmare gone too far came up into his mind's eye with blaring intensity, "*There's nothing good about you Colt!*"

Colt stopped as he gritted his teeth before issuing a tight response, "Yes there is and I'm going to prove it to you!"

Colt turned back and headed down into the valley following along after the wide trail that Kim had made. The least he could do was bury what was left of her, but if he found her alive, well then,

it would be a different story altogether.

I didn't breathe. I didn't so much as blink as I stayed still in the under foliage. My life depended on remaining unnoticed of that I was sure.

The source of my angst shifted its stance heavily and eyed my location again closely for a moment before it lumbered off in the opposite direction from me. Slowly air leaked back into my lungs. My fist rose to my mouth and I pressed my mouth against it hard to try to hold in a sob.

Dinosaurs! Seriously!

This place was hell!!!

Something occurred to me then. I wasn't going to make it off this island

alone and it was with bitter self-realization that I came to that conclusion.

I wiped at a few tears as I said, “Okay God I’m going to stop fighting You. You’ve made it very clear where I’ve gone wrong. Very clear.”

I slipped free of the grove of bamboo and started back the way I had come, “Oh God don’t let him kill me!”

A snarling growl abruptly stopped me dead in my tracks as all thought of the man I had drugged fled from me. I brought the gun up to take aim on the thing that looked like a mutant dog on steroids. There was more than one of them.

Two others of the strange beasts closed in on either side of me and my finger tightened on the trigger. A roar off in the distance stilled the motion of my

finger. If I fired the gun that monster that had just passed me up might be back. On the other hand if I didn't pull the trigger I might become a chew toy.

The large mutant looking hounds glanced back to me from the direction of the distant roar and their snarls of interest resumed. I had no choice. I pulled the trigger.

At least I would've pulled the trigger if I hadn't had to duck out of the way as one of the hounds from the side lunged for me. In the process of evading the snapping jaws I stumbled and fell. The gun went off.

The percussion of the shot was loud and the hounds instead of diving in for a bite shied off a bit from me. I stumbled back up to my feet clutching the pistol. I bit my lip hard in anxiety. I'd lost my

glasses!

I slowly twisted about trying to focus on the blurry shapes that circled around me. I couldn't really discern the bodies of the hounds clear enough to get a shot or I would've taken it.

They were getting braver again and I saw a fast-moving blur off to my right and I fired the pistol. I missed it, but at least the hound broke off from the attack.

I only had four bullets left and I couldn't see anything!

I'd never been so helpless in my life since the time as a kid when my uncle had extinguished his cigarettes on me, if I hadn't pleased him well enough.

My uncle had been a piece of living crud. So had my two cousins, who used to beat Koke up, when he stood up for me and asked for more food, because we

were hardly ever given any.

My uncle had always sneered at our request for food and thrown us out of the house for a few days. It had been one of those times when we'd been thrown out that we were picked up and taken to the orphanage.

We'd been seven at the time and for as long as I lived, which wouldn't be much longer, I would never forget the missionary who had placed a bowl of rice in my hands and asked for nothing in return. Up to that point I'd had a picture of what men were like.

They were loud, bad tempered and liked to be pleased. The missionary and his wife had completely altered what I knew of life.

Sheltered in the city I'd forgotten what it was like to be without security once

again. Without a safety net of protection there was very little separating the me of the present from the girl of the past.

One word came to my lips, “Colt?”

He wasn’t my uncle. He’d made two beds, when he could have done anything that he’d wanted to me.

Yes, he was dangerous. Yes, he was the opposite of anything I’d ever considered in a relationship, but he was security and I had no more pride left in me.

“Colt!” I screamed out as the snarls grew louder again.

“I wondered how long it would take you.” Came a voice from the jungle.

The words were said coldly, but relief shot through me at the sound of Colt’s voice anyway.

Everything would be okay now. I

didn't know why, but I just knew that it would be.

There was a pained yip and then the corresponding death cry of one of my savage tormentors. Its cries were closely followed by another's and with a yip of fright I heard the other one take off through the heavy understory growth.

My hands holding the pistol had fallen and numbly I let the pistol slip from my grasp. My ordeal wasn't over by any means.

I had a very angry male on the prowl and I was as helpless against him as I had been with my other tormentors. He had reason to be angry and I didn't fault him for it. If he'd been my uncle I could even now have expected the hard backhanded slap that would've knocked me off my feet followed by the hard

kicks given to my stomach and back by my cousins.

Colt wasn't my uncle though and mad as I knew that he was I also knew that he'd never hit me.

How did I know that?

I just did somehow.

If I knew that, then, why was I so afraid?

I knew the answer to that too. Things had just changed radically. I'd essentially just made myself his, when I'd called out to him for help.

Despite what I'd done to him he'd come back for me and as a reward I was his. It was scary and thrilling all at the same time.

All the veneer of society had been stripped away and the truth was that I really was Eve to his Adam if he

deemed it so.

Did he still want me though or had he come back out of noble ideals alone? He was a far nobler person than I was if that was the case.

I hugged myself with my arms and involuntarily shivered as I saw the blurry outline of my rescuer come closer. Fittingly he'd dispatched my attackers with a spear made out of a pole with a knife blade strapped to the end of it. This man was truly in his element here in this violent sunken world, even as I was out of mine.

He stooped down in front of me and retrieved the gun and something else, which I took to be my glasses. I refrained from asking for them back even though I desperately needed and wanted the clarity of sight that they afforded me.

He was the one calling the shots now. Vaguely I saw him slip the pistol into his waistband and then I saw him fold my glasses and stick them in a pocket.

So he was going to punish me with near blindness. I swallowed any objections away that I had to his actions though. I got the impression that I should just keep quiet right now.

His hands engulfed my upper arms and he almost pulled me off my feet as he brought me up onto tiptoe to stare point-blank into my eyes. His grip on my arms hurt, but again I remained silent of any protest.

This close to his face I could see every detail of it clearly. Up close I could see fine and he was very close.

He held me so close that I was firmly pressed up against him as our silent

staring match continued unabated. The physical contact with him sent a thrill of awareness through me the likes of which I had never experienced before. I swallowed reflexively as I did my best to meet his steely gaze even as I felt my perceptions of almost everything changing.

“If you ever.....”His words trailed off even as his face expressed the emotion of the words left unsaid.

I quickly nodded my head in acceptance of the fact that I was never going to double cross this man again.

In full conciliatory style I said, “I’m sorry!” This man could have been eaten while he lay down and out cold and yet he’d saved me from being eaten instead.

His eyes gazed deeply into mine and some part of my acceptance of him as my

headship must've shown through as he let me settle down to my feet. He was still angry, but he wanted something more from me than just to take out his vengeance.

I had important information to relay to him and I awkwardly spilled it out in my need to end the silence, "There's a dinosaur not far from here. It might be coming back here because of the shots!"

His big hands released me as he said, "Plant eater. Harmless to us unless we get in its way. We need to get back to the ridgeline though before something else does show up. Make sure you keep up with me, because I'm not coming back for you again!"

I did my best to follow him, but I was tripping over almost everything. He stopped with a disgruntled sigh and

handed me back my glasses, “Here take these!” He said roughly.

“Thank you!” I said offering up my apology for really everything once again.

All I got was a grunt in response, but it was a start to communication. I followed along after him panting heavily in his wake as he attacked the ridge as if he was taking his aggression meant for me out on the trail leading upward. I was very grateful for that.

Chapter Ten

By the Hair

Colt stared moodily across the fire at Kim.

Darn female!

Why did she have to look so cute slumped over against a tree fast asleep?

Her slight snoring did nothing to diminish her desirability. He looked away.

In a way he couldn't believe that he'd gone back for her after what she'd done to him. The memory of that caused his temper to burn again, but there was

nothing he could do about it.

He didn't hit women. In fact he'd beaten up men for doing just that. You just didn't hit a woman.

Spitefully he'd tried to get back at her at first by keeping her glasses from her. All that had accomplished was to make him feel extremely childish and he'd soon given up on that.

He didn't need her breaking a leg or something. She had such nice legs at that.

Grimly he looked back away from her and up into the glowing sky overhead. What had that look of surrender that she'd given him been all about?

Beyond that strange look that she'd given him she'd also surprised him by keeping her mouth shut. She hadn't complained about anything even though he'd pushed her unmercifully to make up

for lost time.

Introspectively he wondered as to what lost time was down here. This had been a one-way destination of that he was sure and as of yet he had no way of even understanding the measurement of time in this sunken world.

Colt looked back to the gently snoring form of Kim. He might as well make the best of what time there was.

Who was he kidding? *'Make the best of'*, yeah right, Kim was a fantasy come to life for him.

A woman like her would never have given so much as a passing look at him in polite society, but out here things were different. She hadn't liked being dependent on him at first, but something had changed in her.

He had been poised to throw his

makeshift spear at one of the big overgrown mutts, when she'd shocked him by calling out his name. Her doing that had touched him deeply and diffused a lot of his anger.

He glanced down at his singed hand. It didn't burn so much now thanks in large part to Kim. She had come up beside him at one point today and smeared some gummy mushed up plant onto it.

She was definitely different somehow since he'd gone back for her.

When he'd stopped to make camp she'd given him that distrustful look that said, 'Now you're going to take advantage of me aren't you heartless barbarian'.

He hated that look!

Call it what you will, but people always seemed to think the absolute

worst of him and had been prescribing a beastly nature to him for years. Self admittedly he had played the part of their low expectations of him to a degree.

Those naysayers weren't here though. It was just him and her.

He wanted her. What man didn't want his ideal fantasy girl?

Fantasy girl or not he would never have gone back for her if that was all she was to him.

What was she to him?

He wasn't sure, but he wanted to find out.

He had already let her sleep over an hour past when he had wanted to leave camp. He was getting soft.

He let his hand fall to touch her one and only change of clothing. Idly his thumb and pointer finger felt the soft

material of her bra. He'd completely freaked her out when he'd gone through her pack.

Colt's eyes closed as he admitted that in some small degree he had deserved to have been fed hallucinogenic fruit for terrorizing her so. He could be hard on himself, but the truth was that he really wasn't joking about what he wanted. It had been a long time since he'd wanted something with such a passion and he had never experienced such passion for another individual as he did for Kim.

In this sunken realm of the world separated from the world above he had decided that she was his. That was why he had rescued her. All that remained was to claim her, but he wasn't a beast. He wanted it to be a mutually shared experience.

There was a problem with that though. Her.

Something was a bit messed up with her and he had a good idea as to what it was. Apparently even fantasy girls come with a dark side to them.

He could deal with it though, if she was done with it, otherwise it was a no go. He'd drop her off in the first safe spot, if such a spot existed, that he came across if the kind of relationship that he wanted wasn't possible for her.

Some men wouldn't have cared just so long as they'd gotten to enjoy what she had to offer, but he cared. He wanted something more than just the physical.

He hadn't gotten much out of life the way that he'd wanted though. Maybe this time would be different he thought idly as he felt the soft fabric between his

fingers.

Would her skin be this soft?

“I could wear that one today if you’d like.”

Blinking Colt looked up in surprise his fingers leaving the fabric of the bra guiltily.

I swallowed and then watched a little nervously as he got up and came toward me. Why had I offered that?

Somehow I couldn’t get over the thrill I’d experienced yesterday when he’d had me up on tiptoe pressed up against him. The sight of him touching the bra idly just seemed to have brought the moment to mind and I’d said something I wish that I could take back now.

He stopped beside of me and dropped the clothes to the ground.

I looked up and he said, "I'd like that."

That was all he said before he made his way out of the campsite. Was he really giving me privacy or was even now circling back to peak at me?

I immediately rejected that thought. Colt wasn't the peeping tom sort. No he was the kind that would walk up and grasp a shirt and send buttons flying.

Another thrill coursed through me at the image of that becoming a full-fledged fantasy suddenly entered my mind.

I held a hand to my forehead as I tried to mentally rein in my errant fantasy minded thoughts. What was wrong with me? Or was the better question, what was finally going right with me?

I swallowed at the thought of that and hurriedly got changed. He was back before long with some fruit and a very ordinary looking rabbit.

“So what do you think about all this?” I asked abstractly.

Colt glanced back at me and gave me a measured look, “About what?”

I swallowed and gestured around me not liking how my innocent question had been turned around on me.

His eyes after lingering on me a moment longer strayed a way to look up at the cloudy orange sky overhead.

“Falling through the world, glowing clouds, dinosaurs and blood thirsty pirates. Is that what you’re referring to

Kim?”

I nodded.

“I think..... I think we'd better find shelter ASAP!!!” He exclaimed, as he gazed over my shoulder at something behind me.

I turned quickly to see what could possibly put such a look of alarm on Colt's face. Part of me expected to see an onrushing dinosaur, but what I found was a storm. A storm like no other.

The entire sky lit up and fractured as lightning streak after streak fractured out over it into a thousand fingers of blazing color.

“Oh God!” Was all I had time for before I was jerked around roughly by Colt's grasp on my hand. He was tugging me on at breakneck speed through the jungle as he left the exposed ridge in

favor of the lower jungle and the shelter that it offered from the storm.

I couldn't resist looking back for a moment as he drug me on. The fast approaching storm was so beautiful in a way, but then I saw the winds slam into the forest in the distance. As trees fell and the howl of the storm sounded loud in my ears I turned around and focused on escaping.

The storm hit. The rain and wind was so hard both of us were beaten to the ground instantly. I'd never felt any raging of the elements with the severity of this storm before.

The pain of being repetitively slammed into the ground by wind and rain alike abruptly ended. In my disorientation I glanced around to see that it was still raining and trees were

falling all around us. Why didn't I feel the rage of the elements anymore?

Then I felt his weight on me and saw his hands on the muddy ground to either side of my head. I stayed where I was oddly humbled by his action of providing shelter at his own expense.

It was different having a man do something like this for me. Koke would've done something like this, but he wasn't here and Colt was.

The rain died off, but the wind did not.

Colt had to shout to be heard, "We've got to get away from these falling trees!"

I couldn't agree more! It was terrifying to see so many trees falling everywhere. The jungle was literally being torn apart.

My shelter was gone and suddenly I

was re-exposed back to the elements in a rude awakening to reality. I gripped a hold of Colt's hand tightly as we ran pushed on by the wind.

There were rocks up ahead and then I saw the dark mouth of a cave opening. I wanted to pull back on Colt's hand, but I didn't. Trepidatiously I viewed the cave entrance wondering if there was a dinosaur or more of those mongrel hounds waiting for us inside.

A tree fell down with a whoosh behind me and with a shriek I dove into the cave with Colt. There were no monsters that greeted us, none at least that had made their presence known anyway.

The storm continued to rage outside, but for the moment we'd found a shelter of sorts. I was drenched and the cave

was cold.

Slowly I approached the stationary figure of Colt where he stood just within the cave staring out at the storm. I touched his arm and he jerked hard and I flinched back as he gave me a hard look.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to startle you!” I said quickly.

The hard look that had scared me with its intensity fell away abruptly and he reached out and caught my hand, “No, no it wasn’t you. Memories, bad memories is all. What did you need?”

Those must’ve been quite some bad memories that he’d just been having to invoke such a haunted look of extreme angst.

I stepped closer to him out of my sense of need, “I’m cold.”

His arms encircled me and pulled me

forward against him and my face pressed into the black curly hairs of his exposed chest. I could've stayed off to myself shivering and survived, but I had wanted to feel this. Feel him. I wanted to know if it was different.

It was.

It wasn't sexual, well maybe a little, but primarily it was something else. Something deeper and more personal.

It was security and yet it was more. I was defenseless in his arms, but I didn't feel like a victim. I felt special. Cared for.

Suddenly everything coalesced into a shocking realization that resounded throughout me in a way that left no corner untouched. I wanted him.

I swallowed reflexively as I experienced this awareness for one of

the opposite sex for the first time in my life. Instead of drawing away I felt myself pressing my face harder against his chest.

He had a musky almost sweet smell to him. I liked it.

How did he smell so good after days of sweating?

Suddenly I felt his one hand leave my back and drift upward. His fingers speared through my wet hair to grasp my skull at the nape of my neck.

This man's power was a tangible quality. His light grip on my head pulled my head back from his chest and my gaze met his. His eyes were passioned and curious. Why curious, I asked myself?

“Kim I'm going to kiss you.”

I swallowed, but didn't move as he kept my head still and captive to receive

his kiss. His approach was slow and cautious and I got the impression that all I had to do was speak up and he'd stop. I didn't though and I held still as his lips joined fully with mine.

I opened my eyes and met his gaze point blank. After a long moment our lips parted. I'd liked it.

Some part of me was shouting for joy, while some part of me was shivering in deep fear of the unknown.

His lips quirked slightly upward in a smile as he said, "You liked that didn't you?"

I was saved from an answer as his lips found mine once more in a kiss that he deepened and held for a long moment of intensity.

Breaking apart slightly I tried to catch my breath and gather my thoughts, but his

words had me focusing suddenly only on him. “How does it feel for you?” He’d asked softly.

Things started to add up in my head and I met his knowing gaze and said, “You know about me don’t you?”

His look was thoughtfully contemplative as he responded, “There are some giveaways.”

My gaze lowered from his and I pressed back enough to turn around, but his arms wouldn’t release me.

His words sounded loud next to my ear even though he spoke no louder than a whisper, “Did you like it?”

I bit my lip hard. I had!

Still pressing against his arms to be free I asked, “Don’t you mind about what you’ve guessed at?”

His words came slow and steady,

“Did you like our kiss Kim? Yes or no.”

“Yes!” I admitted.

His hands turned me about before I knew it and my head was pulled back so that my eyes met his probing gaze again even as his free hand possessively pressed against the small of my back and drew me into him. I swallowed at the sight of the smoky passion that burned brightly in his eyes for me.

He spoke, “Yes, I do mind Kim. I mind very much actually, but.....”

I waited breathlessly for him to continue.

“But I can overlook the past, if from now on no one else is involved. Sound good?”

I don't know what kind of spell this man had me under, but I nodded my head.

“Good! But I need something more from you than just that commitment. Your mine Kim. Say it.”

His words weren't threatening, but they were infused with confidence and the knowledge of his eminent dominance. My mind raced over everything and came up with a startling discovery, which I meekly gave voice to, “I'm yours.”

“You won't run away from me again right?”

“I..... I.....” I stuttered, as I tried to frame words.

His voice broke in and his words reflected a revealing honesty, “I say the wrong things at times and I can be a real jerk, but I'll never hurt you Kim. You can trust me.”

“I don't even know you.” I said softly.

He smiled as his head lowered again to mine, “Let’s fix that then.”

I pulled back breathlessly from another drawn out kiss and surprisingly he let me go. That helped knowing that he could pull back like that and let me have a little space.

Things were happening way too fast!

One day I was getting thrills, the next day I was being kissed out of my senses. I’d be his Eve before I knew it and helping him keep the species alive from extinction if I didn’t watch it and yet I’d already told him that I was his.

That sounded positively primeval. This place was primeval though and the man I had been paired up with was fully primal. My own reactions to everything seemed primal.

I’d turned my back to him and now I

turned back as I heard him doing something. He was making a fire. He quickly added wood to the blaze that had already started up and we both turned with a gasp at the sight of the twinkling gleam of the fire's light off of the heaped up mounds of trunks overflowing with treasure. A King's ransom lay sprawled out before us.

As if I was asleep and distant from reality I approached the glittering treasure.

“Don't! It's probably.....”

I screamed as I fell through space. I came to an abrupt jerking stop that caused me to scream out again, only this time in pain.

Colt had caught me, but he'd done so by grabbing my hair. I cried out again as I was moved upward. A hand grabbed

my arm and I was hauled up the rest of the way far less painfully.

“I’m sorry!!! I Oh God that had to hurt, but I had to! You were gone so fast and it was all that I had to grab a hold of. Oh darn it your scalp is bleeding! I love your hair, I’m so.....”

My head hurt, but I blinked past the tears of pain in order to grasp his forearm lightly and say, “It hurts, but I’m alive. Thank you!”

We sat on the ground several feet back from the unseen abyss that lay just before the glittering pile of jewels. His arms about me were secure and I sat in a dazed shock as I contemplated my newest encounter with death.

Once again I’d been snatched out of the jaws of the grave by Colt. It was becoming a habit.

“I’m still sorry.” Colt said softly as he continued to hold me.

He cared of all things about my hair? It wasn’t an act he was putting on either.

So many thoughts and scenarios were coming out of nowhere all of a sudden and it was giving birth to a whole new range of emotion and desire that I’d never before imagined had even existed within me.

“Is your hair going to fall out now?” He asked in a mournful tone.

Despite the stinging pain I smiled slightly and said, “Probably not, but if it does it’ll grow back I promise.”

Suddenly awkward by it all I quickly withdrew myself and stood up. Colt got up and went back to the fire. He was back with a burning branch within a moment.

He held it over the abyss I had fallen part way into and its light revealed a grim site. The drop-off was a sheer forty feet or so down and there were quite a few skeletons at the bottom both of man and beast alike. I could've been one of those.

“Do you think whoever stashed this treasure intended all this?” I asked gesturing to the hole.

Colt cocked his head to the side and regarded me with a wry smile.

Okay that had been a dumb question.

Colt chuckled then and I couldn't help but notice how nice it sounded. What did his laughs sound like?

“Look.” He said pointing.

I followed his finger and saw a narrow ledge along the one side of the abyss that led off into a darker

passageway. Colt without saying another word headed for the narrow ledge.

“You’re not going back there are you?” I stammered out in sudden concern.

He glanced at me and shrugged, “Why not?”

“Why do we need treasure? It’s too risky Colt. Please don’t go!”

“You sound concerned, how touching. Call me curious, but I want to see what the real treasure is.”

“What are you talking about? The treasure’s right there before us you can see what’s there.” I said puzzled.

“Correction, that’s the lure if you will, intended to protect something much more important.”

“And you know this how?”

“Gut instinct. Wait here, I’ll be back.”

I shook my head vehemently as I gave the mouth of the cave a quick look.

“Nothing doing! I’m coming with you.”

He shrugged and moved on.

I approached the narrow ledge and after a moment I stepped out onto it. Colt’s hand came out to press reassuringly against my back and it helped to relax me. Before long we were past the ledge and together we started into the dark passageway.

Chapter Eleven

Glow in the Dark

The makeshift torch was so about to go out!

This had been a bad idea. As if in echo to my thoughts I heard Colt grimly mutter, “Not my best notion.”

Wow, a man that could admit when he was wrong!

That was cool. I hadn't expected such humility of a man like Colt. Actually when it came down to it I didn't really know much about the man other than my preconceived ideas of him which he had

mostly proven wrong.

The torch sputtered and went out leaving us standing in the pitch dark of the cave tunnel. I wasn't big on small dark places, but I stayed quiet.

Colt sighed loudly and then resignedly said, "Go on say it."

"Say what?"

"That I'm an idiot for going down this rabbit trail!"

"I don't think you're an idiot."

"You don't?" He asked sounding genuinely surprised.

"You had a good theory."

"But I've marooned us in the dark underbelly of who knows where! I bet we've come almost half a mile or more! Can you imagine what it's going to be like to feel our way back out the way we came?"

I grimaced at the prospect of that, but I still felt that he wasn't being all that fair to himself.

“Well, be that as it may, we're still alive and I haven't been eaten yet by some dinosaur or caught and raped by pirates, all of which could have happened by now on the surface. While our situation isn't the greatest it is still manageable and I think you had a good idea and I think we should go on instead of turning back.”

There was a moment of silence that stretched out for a long time then and I was beginning to wonder if I'd said too much.

Colt's voice was different sounding than his usual hard-edged tone, “You have that much confidence in me to continue risking your life by following

me?”

There was a clear answer to that in my head.

“I wouldn’t be alive right now if it wasn’t for you Colt, several times over to be exact. I’d be a fool not to have confidence in you. Besides what’s there not to be confident about you? You’ve more than held your own in this survival game, while I feel like I’m in over my head waiting for the elevator to stop its freefall.”

There was another long silence before Colt’s voice broke it, “All right, we’ll go on then.”

He moved forward and I quickly grasped the back of his shirt not wanting to become separated from him in the dark. He tapped away with the torch stick as he felt the way out forward

gingerly. A thought occurred to me then and I gave voice to it.

“Your stick isn’t long enough for you to adequately be sure of feeling out the way ahead.”

“Your point being what?” He asked in an aggravated tone.

Somehow I knew his annoyance was more with himself that it was the result of something directed personally at me or something that I had done. Not liking it, but seeing no alternative I said, “I should go first. I’m short and it would be easier for me to feel out the floor ahead of us than it is for you.”

“Not happening honey! I go ahead first, because we don’t know if there’s something back here and if somebody’s to be eaten it should be me for getting us in this mess!”

“What if you step into a hole like I did? Do you think I’m going to be able pull you out of one? Doubtful is too hopeful of a word to describe that scenario.”

He said nothing and I took that opportunity to slide by him in the dark. There was that awareness tingle again. Awareness shot through me in spades as Colt’s hands came down to securely fasten on my hips. Why did he have to hold onto me like that?

One hand moved to my front and I took the extinguished torch stick from him.

“Lead the way, Shorty.” He said.

My teeth gritted harshly at the mention of my shortness. I wasn’t all that short!

I wasn’t exactly average height by American standards either though.

“Boy, I can literally feel how angry saying that made you.”

“How would you like to feel how angry I am right now?” I said hotly in response as I stepped forward dislodging his grasp of my hips.

He chuckled in the darkness, “Okay, whatever you say Shorty.”

That did it!

I wheeled around and swung the torch stick. My swing was arrested in action by a steel grip. I punched out with my other hand only to have its action arrested as a big hand folded over it totally engulfing my small fist. What kind of night vision did the man have for pity sakes!

Both my arms were twisted behind my back as I was pulled forward roughly against him. I was helpless and I didn't

like it. Strangely though, I wasn't scared.

"You Miss Kim have a temper." Came Colt's voice in a humorous tone near my ear.

"I don't like being called Shorty and I don't like being restrained!"

His words were a surprise, "I apologize for egging you on, but that doesn't excuse the fact that you were in the process of trying to do me bodily harm yet again."

His hold on me was unrelenting and in a defeated tone I asked, "What do you want? I apologized for letting my temper act out. Now please let me go!"

I really wasn't expecting it, but his hands released me. I made to step back, but his fingers curled over the neckline of my shirt and tugged me forward.

"Let go!" I responded hotly.

“I will, after.....”

“After what?” I asked breathlessly.

“After you kiss me.”

I swallowed nervously before responding, “I don’t have to do that! I.....”

“Yes, you do.” He said cutting me off midsentence.

“Why? Who made you my boss?” I asked.

“It would seem that the simple joined task of mutual survival has seen to that and aren’t you forgetting that you said as much. Now I want you to kiss me.”

I started to speak, but his fingers touched my lips halting my words.

“Stop thinking so much. We both know that you made a choice. You willingly chose to stick with me just as I chose to come back and pull your butt

out of the fire. Now let's get this thing between us started off good and proper, because I don't want it all to be one sided between us."

He had me alone in the dark and I was chained by his words as much as his hands had just been upon me. He was right, I had made a choice. The choice that I'd known to make ever since the plane.

I was with him in this dark place of my own volition, but it was frustrating to have it turned against me. I hadn't been expecting this!

I'd been expecting to be pressed up against a dark cave wall and have his kisses forced on me even though I was receptive to them, but instead he was insisting that I kiss him! Arrogant man!

"But I'm angry with you!" I said

grasping at straws.

“Anger is a strong emotion. I’d like to taste it off your lips.”

My hand itched to slap him. The fingers holding my shirt were persistent in their hold on me, which kept me from leaving the engagement.

“I hate you!”

“Another strong emotion. You know what they say though. The closest emotion to hate is love.”

My hands swung, but I came up with empty air as instead my hand was captured at the wrist and a kiss pressed against the back of my knuckles.

“I’d rather kiss a pig than you!”

There was a loud sigh in the darkness, “Very well then. Consider our relationship over. You’re free to make your own way.”

His grasp of my shirt and hand were completely gone then. There was complete silence in the darkness all around me.

I felt through the air were Colt had just been, but all I came up with was empty air. I panicked inside. Oh he so knew how to call my bluff!

I looked upward and lost my last vestige of self-respect as I said, "Alright I'll kiss you."

I was greeted with silence.

"Colt?"

Nothing.

I turned around and abruptly ran into something solid. It was Colt.

He was silent and I tried to not let it show what a relief that it was that he was still here.

I had to live up to my part of the

bargain as it were though. I felt with my hand upward and located his lips. Swallowing reflexively I rose up on my toes and gave him a quick kiss that landed off-center so much so that I more or less just pecked at his cheek.

“I’ll leave for good this time if that’s the best you can bring yourself to kiss me.” Came his sardonic reply in the darkness.

I shook my head no and said, “No you won’t.”

“I won’t?”

“You’re not that kind of man Colt. I know you better than to think that you would leave me in here alone.”

“Then why did you just panic like you did when you thought I’d gone. Don’t lie to me Kim.”

“I have deep-seated negative

programming of what I expect of men that blinds me sometimes as to what reality is. You're one of only a few men that doesn't fall into the stereotypes that I'm used to dealing with."

What I'd just said was the truth and then not sure why I said, "I thought you were going to kiss me."

"Do you want me to kiss you Kim?"

I didn't say anything. His hands pulled me closer, until I could feel his hot breath against my forehead.

"Kiss me first and then I'll give you what you want."

He was right there and the scent of him was oddly intoxicating and I suddenly forgot all remembrance of why I was against this. I leaned up and kissed him on the lips for a few brief seconds, but it was enough to send my heart

spinning.

“That was a good start Kim. Now I’ll kiss you. Tell me if you want me to stop.”

“Stop!” I said quickly.

His hands left me, “Okay.”

He was readily telling the truth as to how I could trust him by his actions alone. Something inside of me mourned the loss of what he had been about to do.

“Colt?” I said in a small voice.

“Yes?”

“I’m not good at this.”

“It shows.”

“I don’t know how to get a hold of how I’m changing inside.” I self admitted.

The fingers of one of his hands speared through my hair to rest against the back of my neck in a warm clasp that

was neither demanding nor domineering, but instead felt calming.

“Here’s a suggestion. Why not embrace the change instead of fighting it?” Colt said softly.

His hand was softly urging, but it was me that leaned up and brought my lips to his in a kiss that stretched on and on. The kiss was different and completely guiltless. Why had I been against this?

Colt was the first to draw back and with a sigh he said, “This needs to be continued, but for now let’s get out of here!”

I nodded in a bit of a dreamy stupor forgetting that he couldn’t see me. I found myself pulled around and once again his hands settled on my hips only this time I didn’t really object to it.

The stick was pressed into my hand,

“Your club mademoiselle.”

I smiled in the darkness and started forward.

Was this eternity of darkness ever going to end?

I was growing very frustrated with the darkness and with Colt's hands. With every step forward that I took they rubbed into me and I..... I..... I didn't know what I wanted.

I tripped over a stone and the hands holding me reacted as if I'd just commenced to fall into a bottomless pit. I was abruptly hauled upward and back. I landed with a thud onto Colt's front as we both fell to the cavern floor.

“Are you all right?” Colt asked with

concern.

“Let go of me!” I said in a huff, as I tried to get free.

In the process of rising I slipped and fell back on to Colt. His hands caught my hips again and in what felt like a knee-jerk reaction I seized his face with both of my hands and kissed him hard. The kiss was intoxicating and I loved it!

I pulled back abruptly and stumbled up to my feet.

“What have you done to me?” I exclaimed feeling at my lips in the dark.

I’d practically assaulted the man!

Colt chuckled wryly and I heard him getting up off the cavern floor.

“You have a funny way of looking at it Babe. A better question Honey is what you’ve done to me. You keep kissing me like that and things are going to escalate

sooner than you may be comfortable with.”

“Oh no!”

“Well, you don’t need to react like that about it! I’ve gotten the opinion that you’re quite receptive to being my mate in this underground world that we’ve ended up in. The time to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion is soon upon us honey.”

“Would you just shut up and look!” I said in exasperation.

I heard him come closer and his head blocked my view of what lay ahead around the corner a moment later.

“Oh boy! Things just got a lot weirder in this little paradise of inner turmoil!”

I peered around his shoulder and asked, “What is it?”

“Beats me honey, but it sure ain’t

pirate loot!”

Together we stepped forward and entered into the little cavern alcove that now lay before us. On a central pedestal that was the only apparent architecture in the room there hung a scroll in mid air. The scroll was unrolled as if by unseen hands and it glowed with a fierce brilliance.

The writing upon the scroll shifted in a myriad of highlighting colors that was eye-catchingly beautiful. It was the most ethereally beautiful piece of advanced technology I'd ever seen. No iPad, smart phone, etc. could ever compare with this item of antiquity before us.

I reached a hand out toward the shimmering colors that highlighted repetitiously upon the scroll to see if the scroll was reactive to my touch as I

sensed that it would be.

Colt's hand closed over my wrist halting my forward progress.

“Hold on baby girl. I know it's pretty, but let's look this over a little better first before we take a bite out of the proverbial apple.”

He was right. I pulled my hand back feeling embarrassed for my thoughtlessness of action.

Colt drew close and chucked my chin up with a finger and then kissed me hotly for a moment to my surprise. He let me go then and moved away and I blinked in consternation as I tried to refocus on the graveness of the situation.

“What was that for?” I asked a little dazed.

“Just cuz I wanted to.” Was his simple reply before he further startled

me by smacking my rear on his way by me.

I would never have tolerated such possessive behavior from a man before and I couldn't help but feel shocked at how little I felt affronted at the liberties that Colt was forever taking of my person.

I turned to see him against the wall of the other side of the alcove from where we had come in. He was running his hand over it and as I looked more closely I could see that there were holes in the wall.

Why would there be holes unless.....I swallowed as realization came to me as to what those holes could be for.

Colt was watching me with a sage grin and he nodded and said, "Pays to

scout out the lay of the land ahead sometimes.”

He'd saved my life yet once again it would seem.

There was an entrance on the other side and he stepped into it. He paused for a moment and then turned to me, “Smell that?” He asked.

I shook my head no.

“It's the sea. We're close. This probably comes out near the beach.”

Colt stepped back toward the scroll and got up close to it without touching it. He wasn't really looking at the scroll so much as that he was looking at its base.

“What do you see?” I asked curiously.

“I'm not sure, but I think there's an electrical connection of some kind between the pedestal and that node wire hanging down from the ceiling.”

I looked up and for the first time I saw the black cord that hung down from the ceiling of the cavern. Colt slung his pack off and started to rummage through it. His hand came out with something. It was wire.

“What are you going to do?” I asked even more curious than before.

“I’m going to make a connection and in the process bypass this nasty little alarm they have set up. You better move over to the tunnel in case this doesn’t go well and we get inundated with little poison darts.”

I swallowed down my anxiety and quickly obeyed, but Colt stayed where he was.

“Colt?”

“What?” He asked glancing over at me.

“Be careful.”

He cracked a smile and turned back to the scroll, “Don’t worry babe! I’ve got this under control!”

I watched him attach the bared ends of the wires he’d pulled from his pack to the base of the pedestal. I couldn’t help but think that we were taking an awful chance. Was an alien looking artifact no matter how beautifully mesmerizing it was really worth this much risk?

“Colt why do we even need this thing? Why don’t we just go on and leave it here?”

He paused in his work and was silent for a moment, which surprised me. I thought he would roundly dismiss my objections to the task at hand, but to my further surprise he nodded in agreement with me.

“I’m inclined to agree with you Kim, except for one thing. Here in this sunken world we are decidedly outnumbered by who knows what and without virtually any offensive or defensive moves of our own, we have very little to ensure a positive outcome for ourselves. This scroll looks like a game changer to me. Something like this has got to at least be worth something to somebody and it just might buy us out of a hole some day.”

On an abstracted sounding note he added, “or dig us in deeper.”

I swallowed nervously as I watched him reach up and wrap the other end of the wire from his pack around the node hanging down from the ceiling. The piece of wire that he had spliced between the two contact points began to glow and the scroll fell from its midair

hover over the pedestal.

Colt caught up the scroll that had rolled itself up in a reflexive action upon having been released from the invisible electric charge.

“There we go..... oh darn! It’s burning the wire in half! It’s got too much juice on it!” Colt exclaimed before lunging for the tunnel corridor where I stood.

He dove into the tunnel to land at my feet, while I watched blue sparks snap out in abandon in the other room as the bypassing wire burned through. A blue wave of light pulsed throughout the cavern and there was the immediate sound of wind powered projectiles slamming into stone in the room beyond.

“Are you hit?” Colt asked shaking my shoulder roughly.

In a daze I said, “No, I don’t think so. You?”

“Me neither. We skated by that one! We should.....”

The sound of onrushing water overrode his voice and completed the circuit of panic driven paranoia that my consciousness had flown apart into. I turned to run for the scroll room and the way we had come in order to escape the sound of water that was coming at us from the darkness of the tunnel at our backs.

Before I could make any headway I was seized fast to Colt’s side as he pressed up against the side wall of the tunnel.

“No! We have to go out against the water! It’s the only way we can make it!”

The man was crazy! Certifiable insanity was the essence of the thing that he proposed to do!

There was no more time for thought as the water hit us and filled the tunnel up. We were pressed back against the side of the tunnel by the onrushing water and it was a miracle that both of us kept our feet under us.

I gasped for breath as the remaining air pocket was soon gone and we were fully submerged within the tunnel. There was light enough given off by the scroll to see by, but I wasn't prepared for the sudden jerk to my arm that had me pressing against the onrushing flow of water that had slacked off some in intensity.

I had no choice, but to struggle in an attempt to follow as we walked forward

against the flow of water.

I needed air bad!!!

Oh God I really was going to die!

What was the deal with this string of bad luck anyway?

I'd miraculously survived falling through the Earth, escaped from pirates and flesh eating mongrels, only to end up drowning in a subterranean tunnel with a man that I'd really been looking forward to kissing again.

Our progress through the water had become easier as the flow of water had equalized throughout the tunnels, but it didn't matter. I was out of air.

In horrified anguish I felt my mouth go against everything my brain ordered it to

do and start to open.

You can't breathe seawater! Don't do it!!!

My mouth opened and I drowned.

I did not feel well. Weakly I looked around for Colt and found him. What was going on in this sunken hell of a place?

Why was I breathing seawater? How was such a thing even possible?

There were no answers and yet reality was its own answer.

Colt took my hand and together we swam upward toward the light overhead. We came out of the tunnel and instead of swimming we walked along the floor of the sea toward what appeared to be shallower water ahead.

In desperation to breathe air again and escape whatever false paradigm that we

were experiencing we pushed through the water into the air and drowned all over again.

There seemed to be no end to the hacking and coughing up of sea water. Blindly I stumbled forward toward the blurry color of sand in the distance.

My feet touched warm sand and I fell to my face dry heaving even as I rasped air into my starved lungs which felt like they were on fire. My lungs felt like they had been pulled inside out and soaked in a hot sauce bath.

I closed my eyes against the conscious action it took to take a breath and gradually my body took over the rhythmic function of breathing again. The sand was warm and I felt myself drift into unconsciousness in an effort to get away from the pain of breathing.

Chapter Twelve

Discovery Clause

Colt sat on the sand with his knees drawn up. He stared sourly out at the ocean that rhythmically crashed upon the beach.

He was a stupid fool!

He glanced at the scroll laying on the sand and had to fight against the sudden urge to chuck it out into the sea. The stupid thing had almost caused him to lose something of real value.

He glanced over to his other side where Kim was still sprawled out

asleep on the sand. He'd almost lost her. In fact for a few terrified moments he'd thought he had and it would have been all his fault!

He'd never felt like this about any woman before!

Colt wiped a hand over his face. How was he going to keep her safe?

He kept looking at her and his thoughts changed. She was so beautiful and she'd kissed him like....like wow!

Before he could stop himself he slid over to straddle her and was rewarded by her eyes opening to stare up at him. He didn't miss the nervousness that he saw rise to life within her eyes as she came to the realization that she was alone with him on this beach.

He wanted to take her hands and press them into the sand above her head and

kiss her like she'd kissed him in the cave, but the look in her eyes held him back.

Slowly he settled down onto her and reflexively her hands came up to press against his chest. He stopped.

“What are you afraid of?” He asked slowly.

Her breathing was rapid and her eyes reflected confusion and she seemed to be bound by some unseen force from giving voice to her emotions.

“Afraid you might like it?” Colt asked knowingly.

Still she didn't answer him, but the answer was there in her eyes.

“Want to find out?” He asked feeling a little desperate due to the intense longing that he felt for this woman.

Slowly she shook her head no.

I couldn't get my heart to calm down even a beat as I watched him watch me. He hadn't said anything since I'd said no.

His lips moved reluctantly, "Okay. I'll let you escape this time, but one day honey. One day you'll be mine and despite whatever you may be thinking I know that you're going to like it." He rolled off of me then and got up and went into the jungle that lay just beyond the beach.

I just lay there in the sand in a relieved state of shock that he'd left and strangely enough remorse. Remorse that I'd said no.

Shakily I got up and brushed the sand

off my clothes that had dried. Colt reappeared and I couldn't meet his gaze. A finger brought my chin up and it was a surprise to see him smiling.

“You're beautiful Kim.”

His eyes were alive with repressed passion that I felt seared by, but his next words were my undoing.

“You're worth waiting for Kim.”

He turned from me to pick up the scroll and his pack and then surprisingly he pulled me close in to his side and we started off walking down the beach. His hand slipped slightly down from my waist to lay on my rear. His hand squeezed and my eyes shut.

I should pull away.

His arm half around me wasn't constricting me in any way other than the weight of his hand on my rear. I really

should pull away.

I tried to work myself up into a passionate outburst of protest against such a domineering handling of my person, but it wasn't to be found.

His touch was such that it said he owned what he touched. I really should be mad about this, but I wasn't. There was a simple truth I just couldn't get past. I liked his touch and I didn't want it to go away.

His touch was domineering, lustful, and a complete invasion of personal space but I, for lack of a better way of putting it, was his. He was my protector and provider. I had tried it on my own and that hadn't gone well and thus by choice I was staying within the reach of his arm.

I was still shocked that he'd pulled

back as he had earlier. What was he trying to prove to me?

I glanced upward to see that he was already looking down at me.

“If I asked you to let go, would you?”

He nodded and I looked forward again.

“Was that a request?” He asked softly and for emphasis he squeezed again.

I didn't answer him and we both continued walking on. It was enough for now that I could trust him.

“Do you like me?”

His sudden question was a surprise. I glanced down at where we were holding hands. I'm not sure when that had occurred in our walk along the beach,

but his hand had at some point slipped down to capture mine.

I looked ahead and said, "Maybe."

His next question was yet another surprise.

"If fate hadn't intervened and landed us here together like this would you have ever had anything to do with a guy like me?"

There was such a hopeful, even mournful quality to his voice that I found myself not wanting to hurt him, but there was no other way about it.

"Colt, I was a lesbian in another life and I've never liked men with the exception of my brother and men who didn't show any interest in me physically."

"And me?" Colt asked.

I nodded my head.

“So you would’ve looked at me as the enemy?”

“Yes.”

A little time went by and I found myself wanting to make up for the obvious disappointment that I had caused him with my answer.

“I’ve never held a man’s hand like this before though. I’ve never kissed a man before you either.”

My cheeks felt hot and I experienced a little regret in supplying such telling information about how I was falling for this man.

“So I’ll be your first then? As a man I mean.”

My cheeks burning I nodded yes, before framing my admission with, “In some ways.”

“What do you mean by that?” He

asked inquisitively.

“I don’t want to talk about it!” I said with heated passion.

My face felt like it was on fire and I turned away so that I wasn’t looking at him.

“Do you think I’ll mistreat you or abuse you?”

I turned back to him and further exclaimed, “I don’t want to talk about this kind of stuff!”

“Answer the question Kim.” Colt said steadily.

In exasperation I said, “I don’t know.....maybe.”

I turned away and surprisingly he was silent, which oddly made me feel bad. I knew he had restraint but I’d just said that he didn’t. Once again I felt overwhelmed with the emotion of not

wanting to hurt him. Why did I even care about what he thought?

I turned back to him, but I kept my eyes down as I bared my soul to this stranger that I'd fallen through the world with, "Do you want to hear about who I am? What makes me tick?"

"I'd love to!" Colt affirmed.

I looked up to see that his gaze on me reflected truthful honesty. I nodded and began, "Okay then I'll give it to you straight. My mother was a whore that left me and my brother one day with our uncle. That was the last we saw of her. We were with our uncle for a couple of years. It was bad. Really bad! Keko and I ran away one day. We were caught and put in an orphanage and several months later a missionary couple adopted us. Things got really good after that. Keko

and I grew up and we left for the big city and the opportunity that it afforded us in the States. Keko was a hard worker, but I'm not, at least I wasn't then. I took an easy way out to pay for college and selfish comforts that I thought I couldn't do without. I made videos. Sex videos with other women and I was involved in a relationship outside of the videos to. The wrongness of it got to me and I got out of that life style and I tried to bury it and put it behind me, but my boss dug it up and held it over my head in order to coerce me into doing illegal things. Illegal actions that cost the jobs of thousands of decent hard-working people.”

“How did she hold it over your head?” Colt asked softly.

Tears slipped down my face as the

enormity of what was even now happening on the surface came back to me in full vivid relief, “She had evidence of my relationship and the videos that I made while in college and she threatened to send it to my adoptive parents. It got bad though and I turned evidence on her. I gave enough evidence to put us both in jail for a very long time. I planned on going through prosecution, but.....”

“But the woman had already sent the package and you were trying to beat it there to explain yourself personally to your adoptive missionary parents.” Colt said interjecting softly.

I nodded miserably.

I looked upward at the orange clouds and on an emotional outcry I said, “They’re up there and I’m down here!

They think I'm dead and all they have to remember me by is a box full of trash that I wish to God had never happened! I've broken their hearts and my brother might be dead all because of what I did!"

Strong arms folded around me and I relaxed into their security and unloaded all my emotions against his chest. He didn't say anything as he held me and I was grateful beyond words for the comfort that he afforded me by just being there.

"I'm sorry." He said deeply.

Drawing back a little I looked up and asked, "You're sorry?"

He nodded, "I wish you'd gotten there to intercept the package."

I cocked my head to the side and said, "If I'd gotten there I wouldn't be here

with you now. You'd be okay with that?"

He shrugged, "Disappointment has been the story of my life. A missed life with you, while bad, wouldn't have been the worst that I've suffered through. If you weren't here at least you wouldn't be suffering like you are in helpless anguish over what has transpired above."

I blinked and then blinked again. He cared that much for me?

My gaze fell back to his chest, "When I turned the evidence over I'd reached a point in my life. A desperate point. I called out to God and I did what I knew to do from my childhood. I begged for forgiveness as the plane was going down. Up until that point it was made very clear to me that God was changing

my life in ways that I didn't like. Ways that I've done nothing but resist. I've known ever since the plane that it was going to be you and me. I've done everything I can to resist the change and yet I am changing. I do like some aspects of you as a man and I do desire you, which is a miracle. If you still want me then go ahead. I won't resist you."

I kept looking down as I waited to be pushed down onto the sand. Instead of apprehension of that occurring all I felt was a sort of giddy excitement. I had changed so much!

He was doing nothing and saying even less. I glanced up to see that he was studying me thoughtfully.

"That was gutsy of you turning in evidence on yourself like that. I've known since the plane that it would be

me and you. Your brother came to me. Don't ask me how he knew, but he knew that we would crash. He made me promise to look out for you. He even gave me his blessing to have you as my woman. I thought he was crazy, but now I don't think so. Kim, I'm not a barbarian even though I admit I have acted as such. Whatever it is that's going on between us goes deeper than just skin deep on my part. I want you yes, but I'd like to continue being with you just as we are now, until you're ready to willingly be excited to be mine."

I stared at him in shock, "You're letting me pick the time and place?"

He nodded and said, "Please don't keep me waiting forever."

I quickly shook my head in denial as I voiced out, "I won't!"

He nodded and said, “Shall we continue our walk into the unknown?”

I smiled and nodded and of my own volition I took his hand with mine.

I felt very humbled by what had just transpired and I said, “Thank you for being a gentleman.”

“Thank you for being willing to be my lady.”

I found myself very much wanting to be his lady and yet in this moment I felt that I didn't even deserve this man. I'd gone from looking upon him as inferior as to now being my superior in terms of character.

We started out again and I asked the question that had been plaguing me, “So you haven't said why we're walking along the beach fully exposed to anybody or anything that might be

watching from the jungle. I thought you said that was a bad idea?”

“Tell me what a better idea would be. Everywhere you look on this little hidden world of wonders there seems to be a threat of some kind.”

I nodded conceding that he had a point there.

“By the way I just wanted to let you know that back on the plane when I flashed nine fingers at you.....”

I felt my face grow warm with the remembrance of how angry he'd made me.

“That was just to make you mad. In reality you're as perfect as perfect can be!”

Blushing hotly now I glanced up despite everything and said, “I'm glad you think so.” I even smiled and perhaps

I drew little bit closer to him.

Koke blinked and then gasped. His mouth gaped open on a scream of fright as he realized he was submerged in water.

Wait a minute!

Why wasn't he drowning?

Koke's wild motions stilled as he calmed at the knowledge that he was somehow breathing water and not dead. What was going on in this place?

He lifted his head and surveyed his surroundings. He was laying on something soft and looking down once more it was to see that it was a spongy type of substance. It actually appeared to be alive!

His hands were tied to carved pillars to either side of the spongy mass that he lay on. Glancing to the side and behind his shoulder he saw two more columns. He was laying on an underwater bed!

A bed like no other to be sure!

He was in a cavelike room that was illuminated by all manner of items. The rock of the cave walls were seamed with glowing blue lines of color, while green wavy Moss that grew upon the walls let off a phosphorescent green glow. There were other more vivid colors here and there and then there were the fish. The fish were every color of the rainbow!

Koke closed his eyes and shook his head. It was time to wake up from this fantasy of a dream.

Something changed in the atmosphere

of the room. Koke knew that he was no longer alone, even as words softly fell into his consciousness, “Your back does it still hurt you?”

Slowly Koke raised his head back up and his eyes opened to see the blonde vision of beauty that had kissed him moments before he had died. She was real?

She was a vision of stunning allure the likes of which he had never seen before in the world above. Her long blonde hair moved about in the water in a rhythm that echoed fantasy, even as her cobalt blue eyes stared at him out of a face that was gentled kindness itself.

Her skin was so white that the vivid color of the sash of cloth that swept around her chest and encased her hips was so bright that it glowed off of her as

if it had the properties of a jewel set against a backdrop of pearl.

Either he was still dreaming or she was a real-life mermaid. A mermaid with legs. Beautiful legs.

Koke glanced up as the vision came closer. Her lips parted in a smile and he stared mesmerized by her as she drew closer and knelt down beside the odd spongy bed that he lay upon.

“You’re not dreaming.”

Again he felt the words, but her lips never moved. He tried to talk, but the words were garbled and lost in the action of the water that filled him.

Her fingers touched his lips as her head shook slightly, “We talk in our heads, but our lips are still good for other things.”

Her words had but dispersed across

his consciousness before her lips were on his in a deep kiss. Her eyes watched him as she kissed him and he knew that she sensed his desire for her. She drew back with a quick smile seemingly satisfied with something that she had seen.

She reached over and pulled a cord that released his hand from the carved pillar.

Her eyes never left his as again words came to him, "You're not a prisoner. I just didn't want you to roll onto your back too soon."

She tugged on the other cord and his other hand came free.

She was wrong about something. Never in his life had he experienced anything like this place or her and her eyes very much held him captive as did

the rest of her.

She smiled as if she knew his high-level of fascination with her. Koke started to push up from off the bed when he realized something. He was naked!

He glanced up again only to behold her blue eyes laughing at him in merriment. He couldn't tell what she was thinking and she wasn't thought projecting anything. Unsure as of what to do Koke stayed the way he was.

She reached out to the side and pulled the broad leafed frawn of a nearby plant off. Holding her arm up she held the frawn out and the leaf curled around her arm snugly. He got the idea, but there was just one problem. The plant leaf that she had picked reflected an effervescent color that was decidedly pink in nature!

He didn't know if he could or not, but

he attempted to thought project his objections to the color choice that she was offering.

She cocked her head to the side with an inquisitive expression. She apparently hadn't understood him. Koke sighed and glanced down at the pink leaf wrapped around her arm.

He heard laughter in his head.

Glancing up Koke saw the laughter in his head reflected in her face. It was impossible to be mad at her and reluctantly Koke felt a smile crack across his face.

Her laughter abruptly stopped and she reached out to touch the smile on his lips. She turned away quickly then and he watched her gracefully glide toward a corner of the room. A shoal of tiny blue fish parted gracefully around her.

Koke gazed at her in open attraction. He swallowed as he realized that what he had mistaken for brightly colored fabric was just the same leaves of the plant that she had offered to him.

She came back holding a good many of the colored leaves that thankfully glowed blue. She let them go and with a suggestive wink she turned her back to him.

Stiffly Koke got up off the sponge bed. He didn't even have to reach out for the colored leaves as they had already found him. They wrapped about his hips and in between his legs in a surprisingly firm clasp. What kept them from simply falling off though?

He had so many questions. He looked up to see her peeking back over one bare shoulder at him. Koke flushed and her

smile deepened.

“I’ve already seen everything man from above. You have no cause for shame man from the land.”

Koke’s flushed condition only deepened and again he felt her laughter, but her face was full of passion. She turned her head back and started to walk forward.

“Come land man and see the realm of Undersea.”

“Undersea?” Koke asked.

“Yes. It is time that you met my father.”

“Your father?”

“Yes he is the King of our colony here.”

Koke groaned at the realization that he was living within the confines of a fairytale. She was a Princess!

She turned back to him with a speculative look that took all of him in before she definitively said, “And you are a Prince of men.”

Her meaning was clear, but Koke’s reaction instead of continued embarrassment was one of anger. He gestured around the cave room, “I don’t understand any of this! How is this possible?”

She nodded consolingly, “All your questions will be answered.”

Koke reached around and felt at his back at the scars there, which felt almost completely healed.

“You saved me. Why?”

She stopped and regarded him in-depthly for a moment before saying, “I saw something of value in your eyes and so I decided to claim you.”

Koke blinked and uncertainly asked, “Claim me?”

She nodded her head confidently, “I am a princess and I have chosen you to be my mate. Now come.”

Koke stood where he was slowly shaking his head no.

“I don’t understand.”

She came back and Koke watched with trepidation as she came alluringly closer. She looped her arms around his neck as she pressed close. Her lips closed over his and he lost the fight to remain consciously apart from the fire to his senses that she was.

“I desire you. You desire me. What more could there be needed between mates?”

“A lot more!” Koke returned as he fought to keep alert and un-drugged from

the touch of her against him.

Her sensual way of allurements abruptly faded to a look of utter sincerity as she grasped his face with her hands and said, "I know and because you know that is why I want you above all others as my mate. I have the right to choose who I will, but you are not powerless in this. Once I am yours you will be master and I will follow where you lead."

Koke stared at her in consternation. He'd never wanted any woman to the degree that he did her, but he had no time for something like this!

In frustration he said, "I have a sister! She's up there on the surface. I don't know what has become of her. She could be in danger. I....."

Her hands cradled the sides of his face, "I know. Many people have fallen

from the clouds above through the years. Many do not survive as the surface is rife with danger, but here in the water we are safe. Safer anyway at least. If your sister is alive I will help you find her.”

Koke stared at her in surprise, “You’ll help me?”

“Certainly, there’s not anything I wouldn’t do for my mate.”

Her face reflected utter sincerity of statement and Koke felt himself scrambling for words, “I..... I’m not sure about all this. Things are moving too fast. I can’t think straight around you! You’re so beautiful and this place is so different. I’m all upside down!”

Her hand touched his forehead, “You think too much. Now this is the way of it. I and my people will help you look for

your sister. You and your sister can never return to the surface of the world you knew before. As for the surface of this inner world, well, you especially, have learned how cruel and heartless it can be.” She said as her hand drifted down his back over the healed roughened edges of the scars there.

He remembered every whip strike as if it had just happened. She must’ve seen the heavy emotion in his eyes because she said, “I will help you end the reign of Captain Sally as well. She is overdue to receive judgment for her crimes.”

Koke looked at her in consternation at her ability to read him so easily.

“You would do all that for me?”

She nodded quickly.

“What is it that you really want?”

Koke asked out of a need to know what

her angle in all this was.

She shrugged expressively, “My people want to see me happy. I think I could be very happy with you. I sensed it the first time that I saw you. You’re going to be a source of change in this inner world of mine that has now become yours. You are a man of faith and my people will be stronger to have you among us.”

“How do you know that I am a man of faith?”

She smiled, “Easy, it radiates out of you. You have a beautiful aura about you. My people could learn much from you.”

“Just what faith are we speaking of? Who do you serve?”

Her words were confidence itself, “There is only one God and He is the

Great Creator of all both above and below and beyond.”

Koke pulled back from her disorienting touch and turned to stare off into the wonders of this underwater world. He believed everything she'd told him. Call him a fool, but he trusted her and she had saved his life.

It was so tempting to give in to her hedonistic request of him to be her mate.

What am I to do God?

All he felt was an open door before him, but he didn't have the courage to take it.

He glanced back to her, “Your people, do they go to the surface?”

Her eyes fell from his and her thought out words had a mournful tone to them, “My people cannot go to the surface and survive in the open-air as we have been

below water for far too many generations, but you may yet leave if you wish.”

It had cost her a lot to admit that, but she'd been honest with him. She'd given him the knowledge that he could leave. Leave her.

Looking around Koke shook his head. Who would ever want to leave a paradise like this much less a fantasy such as her?

How was he to help Kim though?

Kim wasn't his responsibility anymore. He relaxed slightly at the remembrance of the man named Colt. Kim was making her own way in this new world and so should he.

There were injustices in this hidden world that needed to be taken care of.

“You seem a peaceful person and yet

you offer to help me kill a cruel pirate Queen?” Koke asked in a doubtful manner.

A piece of coral exploded beside of Koke and he glanced from the shattered remains of the coral reef to the crystalline structure of an odd looking ring on the girl’s finger.

His eyes rose to hers as she said, “We are a peaceful people, but we can defend ourselves and fight our own battles. I did not lie in what I offered to you.”

“What’s your name?” Koke asked.

“Loranni. What’s yours?”

“Koke.”

She smiled for a moment before her smile turned bittersweet and she said, “You are leaving then?”

Koke shook his head no, “No, I’m staying. I look forward to meeting your

father.”

An impish grin came to her face, “There is no need as he has already approved of my decision. Come let us be one.”

She began to approach once again and Koke stared at her in shock. Surely she couldn't be serious?

Hurriedly throwing his hands up as if to ward her off Koke said, “Don't you think we should get to know each other a bit first?”

“You think too much.” Was all she said as she drew perilously close.

Something firmed within Koke and he held his ground as she came up to him, “I wish to speak to your father first. After that's accomplished then there can be time for other things Loranni.”

Her face was unreadable for a

moment and then he sensed her sigh of defeat.

“Okay man of faith we will do it your way, but before much time passes we will be back and you shall make me whole.”

She took his hand and led him from the cave room into an even more wondrous terrain of the undersea world that stretched out all around them. As mesmerizing as the surroundings were all he could think about instead was how anxious he was to return to this room with her.

Life was never going to be the same again or nearly as tame as it had been on the world above. This whole journey from the plane to now had been terrifyingly extreme, but now perhaps it was all worth it.

Chapter Thirteen

Coconuts

I looked upward to the shifting clouds and listened to the crash of the waves for a moment. All that was missing from this idealic scene was the blue sky and the proverbial corona sitting in an ice bucket.

I glanced over to Colt, only Colt wasn't there!

I abruptly lunged up to my feet and glanced around in panic. My hand rose to my chest as my panic abated at the sight of Colt approaching from down the

beach. Introspectively I acknowledged how much I was falling for the big warrior without a cause.

There was something about Colt that seemed off and in concern I stepped out toward him, “What’s wrong Colt? What did you see?”

He shook his head and made to pass by me to grab up the pack, but I grabbed his shirt and he stopped. He glanced at me and then he really looked at me. I mean really looked at me.

“What?” I asked hesitantly.

He was slow to speak, “I’m worried that I won’t be able to protect you.”

The words came from deep down and I knew it cost him being the dominant macho type that he was to admit to such a weakness.

“I’m not worried.” I said softly.

“You’re not? Well you should be!”

He looked away and I pressed again, “What did you see Colt?”

His jaw muscles bunched for a moment before he spoke, “Do you remember that luxury cruise liner that we saw come down through the whirlpool with us?”

I nodded.

“Well I found it. It ran aground up ahead around that headland. I smelled something when we stopped here and I waited until you fell asleep before I went to investigate.”

His eyes came back to mine as he flatly said, “They’re all dead.”

“Pirates?” I asked somehow knowing.

“Looks like it.” He affirmed.

I could only imagine the grisly scene that he had come across, but it didn’t

explain his reaction. He seemed unsettled on a far deeper level than this occurrence should have gotten him to.

“You were a soldier; surely you’ve seen such sights before?”

He sort of shrugged in agreement before saying, “It was pretty bad back there actually.”

I shook my head, “Were there women?”

He nodded.

“You’re imagining me in the hands of those pirates aren’t you?”

He nodded again and looked away.

I stepped closer and brought my hands up to his face to turn it to mine. He looked shocked.

“I’ve never felt safer in life than I have when I’ve been with you.”

His face was gripped by raw emotion,

“I’ve never had anyone like you in my life. I don’t want to disappoint you!” He said with emotion.

My hands drifted down to his arms maintaining contact as I asked, “What makes you think you’ll disappoint me?”

He shook his head and broke my hold on him. He stooped down and picked up the pack and then with a hand to my shoulder he directed me into the jungle.

“Looks like the jungle just got to be the safer of the two travel options available to us.” He said cryptically.

I swallowed as I stepped forward into the heavy vegetation. That wasn’t saying much in terms of safety.

“Do you believe in God, Colt?” I

asked, as I leaned back against a tree resting for a moment.

Colt looked at me and shrugged as if to indicate he really didn't have a position on it.

"I do." I said confidently.

"Why?" He asked directly.

My reasons weren't ones that I could easily put words to, but they were still there and perhaps I had built up some faith. Despite my best intentions however all that came out was, "I just do."

He snorted derisively and said, "I have my reasons."

"Reasons for what?"

"Reasons for being mad at God!" He said vehemently and then he gave me a look as if daring me to speak further on the matter.

I wasn't to be intimidated though, "Well if you're mad then that means you still believe He exists."

Colt came away from the tree that he had been leaning against and approached me threateningly. It was hard to stand my ground, but I did. It was apparent that I had made him very angry.

"Who are you to question me about how I feel about God? It's a little like the kettle calling the pot black don't you think?"

I knew what he meant and the pain I felt at his betrayal of the trust I had instilled in him to share my story had my hand connecting hard against the side of his face in an openhanded slap. No sooner had I slapped him than I took off running.

"Kim! Kim, I'm sorry! Stop!!!"

I didn't stop and before long I couldn't even hear his voice anymore. I'd managed to lose him, which was just fine!

I didn't need him!

I brushed at the tears running down my face and kept running. Some things never change.

Several hours had gone by and I had worked through my anger, my hurt, if you will and I was ready to admit that running off instead of pursuing communication had been a mistake. He'd said the wrong thing, but then I admittedly had been pressing him on a sore point.

I'd been out of line with the slap, but I'd reacted out of hurt because..... because I'd grown rather close to Colt

and it had especially hurt to hear my past brought up against me by him of all people.

I glanced around the jungle environment and not for the first time I admitted to myself how much I wished that he was here.

I heard waves. I was near a beach again?

I was pretty sure that I hadn't gotten turned around when I'd run away from Colt, but that I had more or less run in a straight line. The only explanation for the sound of water was that this was an island or that the landmass was unusually thin here.

Within ten minutes I made my way to the jungle's edge. I'd approached the edge with caution, because I'd heard activity and the last thing I wanted was

to end up being caught by pirates.

Peering through the foliage I saw that I had stumbled upon a natural harbor. A harbor with ships in it. Big ships at that and they weren't pirate ships. It was a navy of some kind!

I stepped out of the jungle onto the beach. I walked toward the water debating about what to do.

Something caught my eye down the beach and I saw men in the uniforms of sailors further down its expanse. I raised my hand to wave and I was even about to yell to get their attention, when something slammed into me knocking me to the sand.

The attacking force was that of a man of that much I was sure. I actually felt a momentary relief that it wasn't a dinosaur or some other meat eating

beast.

I bit into the hand across my face as I struggled to break free of the oppressive clasp of my unknown assailant. At almost the same moment as I saw the dark curly hairs on the backs of the fingers that I was biting I also smelled him.

I abruptly stopped biting and completely relaxed from my struggle to be free, as I realized that it was Colt that held me. Why had he attacked me like this?

No words seemed to be forthcoming from him as he continued to hold me completely immobile. Was he still mad at me?

He was modulating his breathing to shallow rasps for air and instinctively I matched his breathing.

What was going on?

What had I missed that Colt thought was cause for danger?

Where we lay on the beach was behind a blown down palm tree, but I could partially see under the downed tree at one spot. The sailors I had seen and had been about to call out to had come closer to us.

They had rifles, but there was nothing odd about that to my way of thinking. What was Colt so worked up about?

I saw it then and my eyes about bugged out of my head at the implications. I must've made some movement then, because Colt's grip on me tightened reflexively.

I think I stopped breathing as a sailor glanced directly at the spot that we were hiding in. Could he see us?

The sailor drew closer, which only served to underscore what I had missed upon first perusal. What an idiot I had been!

I'd gotten us killed this time.

The sailor came closer still and I closed my eyes in expectation of a cry of alarm being sent out to the others. Time went by and I opened my eyes only to see the sailor headed back down the beach to join up with the others of the shore party, who were loading into a pontoon boat of sorts.

A couple of the sailors had turtles under their arms, which explained their trip to shore. Colt and I stayed absolutely motionless as the outboard motor of the pontoon boat took off with a whine. The boat headed out into the bay where five other bigger ships were

moored at anchor.

Colt's hold on me loosened and he took his hand away from my mouth. I could still see my tooth impressions on his big fingers. I winced at the sight of that.

I'd only dug myself in deeper. First I'd slapped him, then I'd run away, and now I'd bitten him to the point of drawling blood. I deserved to be spanked.

I couldn't even begin to express how relieved I was to be back with Colt. His words and the meaning behind them had hurt but they weren't enough to send me away for good.

I eased over onto my back in the sand as Colt stayed over top of me staring out at the retreating boat. I closed my eyes. Sometimes it could be said of me that I

acted before thinking and this whole episode was living evidence of my occasional weakness.

Yes, the men had been sailors. Sailors belonging to a navy, but not just any navy, the Japanese Navy. It wasn't a modern Japanese fleet either. Their caps had been emblazoned with the image of a rising sun insignia that I'd seen on more than one World War II classic war movie.

I opened my eyes and stared up at Colt as he continued to stay over me in full guard mode. The ships in the harbor were weighing anchor and leaving one by one.

“How is that even possible Colt?”

He shook his head, “I have no idea. This place only gets stranger and stranger.”

He looked down at me and before he even spoke I could see the worried tension that his face was rife with. He was going to apologize all over himself again and that wasn't right.

My fingers pressed against his mouth to halt the continued apology that I felt was forthcoming.

It was me that spoke first, "I'm sorry! I was digging too much into your past and while your words were hurtful I overreacted and I'm sorry that I ran away and even more that I slapped you! I forgive you for what you said that was hurtful. Will you forgive me for my part?"

He nodded looking relieved.

I was relieved to. This man had never stopped from being of help to me or saving my life since I'd been in this

inner realm. I winced as I caught sight of his bitten fingers again.

“You can bite me back if you want.” I offered.

His dark eyebrows rose and I began to quickly lament my offer. He wasn't actually going to bite me was he?

His eyes had a twinkle to them as he said, “Later.”

My face was red hot and I glanced away to the tune of his deep chuckle.

He rose and took my hand and tugged me forward, “Come on I see something that might be of service to us.”

He led me up to the jungle's edge, but then let go of my hand as he began to tug on something hidden in the tangled shrubbery. It was a boat!

The boat was a native dugout with a crudely fashioned outrigger. Colt

seemed unusually excited over the discovery. I stared at the boat not understanding what could be of any significance about it.

Colt sighed and said, “Natives built this. There are no natives on this island. Everything about this place is hostile so somewhere out there are more islands. Islands with natives, who you look like ethnically. Who knows you may even have a few distantly related cousins living around here. We could use some help for sure and I think this is a good opportunity for us to find it.”

I put my hand on my hip and cocked my head to the side and said, “Did it ever cross your mind that they might be cannibals?”

“You got a better idea honey?” Was his laconic response.

I didn't actually and so I remained silent.

“Can you still speak Polynesian?”

I nodded bitterly, “I'll never forget it.”

Somewhat surprised I felt Colt's finger stroke across my cheek only to hear him say, “Sometime you're going to have to tell me what that look on your face is all about.”

I glanced at him speculatively, “Only if you tell me what causes you to be moody and that dates back to your past.”

Surprisingly he nodded and I felt like we'd just made a huge step forward as a couple. I helped him pull the dugout to the beach and after Colt had thrown a boatload of coconuts on board he shoved the boat into the surf.

It was hard going for a while, but we

eventually made it out into the open ocean.

I held up a coconut and got his attention.

“Did I ever tell you that I hate the taste of coconut in all of its forms?”

He smirked, but didn't say anything. Sourly I tossed the coconut back onto the pile and stared out at the sea moodily.

I pointed off to the right and said, “Head that way.”

“Why?” Colt asked curiously.

I looked at him and pointed again in the direction I had indicated. He dutifully turned the dugout to line up with the course I had given.

“You think there's land out there?” He asked skeptically.

“I know there is.”

“How?” He asked puzzled.

“I feel it.”

He gave me an odd look, but I didn't elaborate any further. I'd never been so sure of an instinctive guess as I was right now.

I was sick of coconuts. Fortunately our time at sea was coming to an end.

The beach before us was crowded with people. My ancestral people and yet they weren't. I looked like them, but that was about where the similarities ended.

I had left this culture behind a long time ago and yet it was as if I'd stepped into my childhood once more.

I stepped free of the dugout and made my way towards the headman.

Everyone was smiling and appeared happy to see us. Old memories assailed me and I was almost overcome by them for a moment.

The language they spoke other than a few changes was the same as I had grown up with and I conversed fluently with the headman, who turned out to be the chief of the whole island. The headman was thoroughly helpful about many things and I could tell that Colt was growing anxious to know what I did.

Finally conversation was at an agreeable halt and I turned to Colt. He was looking around with a wry expression, but when my point of focus shifted to him his eyes swiveled to mine and he asked, "Just tell me we're not for dinner."

My smile widened, “No we are not, but we are invited to a special feast in our honor. They don’t get many visitors who speak their language and they are more than glad to help and give us a place to stay. Come, the headman has given us free range of the island. He says that there are no dinosaurs on the island.” I gestured to the dim outline of another island that lay along the distant horizon, “That one however is another story.”

Colt followed along behind me as our smiling entourage kept pace with us. They were especially interested with Colt. They seemed interested in his hairiness. They kept reaching out to feel his arms.

“Can you tell these dudes to back off from the whole touching business?”

Where I come from dudes don't touch other dudes.”

I said something and the gathered men laughed, but they did stop the touching.

It was several hours to the feast that was being held in our honor and I made good use of it by showing Colt a look into the past of my people that had changed very little down here in this sunken inner world. All in all Colt seemed to be quite fascinated by the historical cultural display going on all around us.

We were having a good time when suddenly I saw Colt's face clamp tight with displeasure and I quickly turned to see what had aroused his anger. Old memories came back to me as I took in the sight of the girl that couldn't be older than ten or eleven on her knees

pleasuring an older man. The scene of carnality was unabashedly out in the open for all to see.

Colt glanced at me and started to say something, but I cut him off, “Colt this isn’t your western civilized culture. Things are different among the island people. They are far looser and more easy going than your western culture with its heavy Christian accents would have them to be. Here it is nothing to sleep with another man’s wife or for a father to sleep with a daughter. The man is likely the girl’s grandfather. Such things are expected as a sign of respect.”

Still looking disgusted Colt said, “I don’t care! That shouldn’t be happening island culture tradition or not!”

I was quick to reply, “I wholeheartedly agree with you, but our

purpose here isn't likely to change anything in terms of how they have lived for thousands of years.”

Colt was looking at me speculatively all of a sudden and I knew what he was going to ask even before I heard the words.

“Did you?” Colt asked as he pointed to the girl.

“My uncle, but that is all that happened.” I said feeling embarrassed by the admonition that it had once been me as a girl over there on my knees.

“I'm sorry.”

I glanced back to Colt in surprise, “Why are you sorry?”

“No little girl should ever be made to do that, cultural sign of respect or not.”

I shrugged and turned away feeling oddly touched inside by his statement.

Colt was different. How few men there must be surely that when presented with an island culture such as this would stick to an outdated sense of morality and refuse the easy pleasure that could be theirs for the taking.

Colt had but to make a gesture of interest to a girl or one of the many grown women casting greedy covetous looks at him and he'd have several of them on their knees before him. Inside I felt an alarming new found awareness of the man I had been matched up with. Such a thing was not in him to do. He was not at his heart of hearts a man that was ruled by his lusts.

I glanced at Colt and to his surprise I reached forward and took his hand. I led him off to see more of the island, which thankfully passed by uneventfully. I

never let go of his hand.

Chapter Fourteen

Faithful

The feast along with the entertainment was in full swing. Literally!

At least forty or more beautiful island girls of my heritage were shaking their hips to a fast tempo beat in front of us. The girls were all topless and I hated each and every one of them!

Talk about plenty enough eye-candy to go around from a male's perspective!

The dancers before us were an endless smorgasbord of tempting delights, fit to drive any man wild with

desire. I was getting madder by the moment as the girls before me worked hard on gaining Colt's attention solely upon them. Everyone of them wanted to lay with the big man fallen from the sky.

I had to refrain from screaming out, "Back Off!!! He's mine!"

Out of not wanting to see Colt's interest in the readily available nubile youth displayed before us I hadn't looked at him since the dance had begun, but I had to know. I glanced toward Colt only to see that he was gone!

When had he left the feast?

Was he even now with an island girl in the bushes somewhere?

Jealously burned through me, but some measure of reasoning caused me to reject such a notion, but doubt lingered.

My gaze caught sight of the old chief

who winked at me. He didn't mean anything lascivious by it and in fact he was quite the dear. I scooted over to him and spoke in my native tongue loud enough in order to be heard over the drums, "My friend, he left?"

The old chief chuckled and shook his head, "Why is it that I who am old and have lost most of my sight can still see better that which is plain to see than those who are yet in their youth?"

I found myself blinking repeatedly. What was he getting at?

The old chief gestured out to the dancers and said, "Hard to turn down yes?"

Yes it was a tempting sight for a man to turn down and hide away from and yet that was what Colt had done apparently. Something else then occurred to me that

rocked my framed consciousness of self to the core. All these beautiful women everywhere and I hadn't even so much as had the notion of considering one as a lover. Instead I'd been bound up with jealousy over the overtures being made to my man.

My man. A man who'd turned his back on temptation.

I took in the old chief's smiling eyes once more as he held up two fingers and twisted them together before gesturing to me with them and saying, "Rare man! You be a fool not to be his, when he save himself for only you!"

The old chief then pointed off to the side at a path that led off into the jungle. I said my thanks and quickly got to my feet and left the clearing filled with smoking torches and the shifting hips of

island girls keeping time to the rhythmic drum beats.

Colt was standing with his face to the sea.

I stepped up beside him and took his hand. He glanced down at me somberly and I said, “Thank you for not staying to watch.”

He nodded and glanced back out to sea.

I looked around the beach only to see that it was clear and with the feast going on it wasn't likely to be visited soon.

I wanted him. He was faithful to me and I would be his for life.

Gathering my courage I stepped in front of Colt ready to take the next and

final step. I was nervous, but I was also beyond excited. Life had suddenly become exciting at the prospect of being with this man.

He wasn't even looking at me!

Oh how I hated being short!

“Colt I.....”

“Those lights?” Colt breathed out in a mystery of meaning.

Those lights?

“Colt I.....”

“Get down!!!”

The next thing I knew I was thrown flat onto the sands of the beach with Colt over top of me. What was going on?

I was about to protest, when the ground shook beneath me repeatedly. Oh God, what was happening?

Trees were falling and the sand of the beach was flying up into the air

everywhere. I couldn't see anything and my ears echoed with the sound of explosions.

“It's that cursed scroll! I should've left it!” Colt said in a self-deprecating monologue as he screamed out his fury directly into my ear, but despite comprehension of his words I was completely in the dark as to what was going on.

“What's going on Colt?” I screamed.

“It's that bloody scroll! I think they're tracking it. We led them right to us!”

The blown up sand all around us cleared enough for me to see the blinking lights further out to sea. The Japanese Navy from a bygone war was firing on us from offshore. Why would they want to destroy something that could be of such great technological value?

Off to the east of the blinking lights there was a sudden flurry of more lights on the distant horizon. We were so dead!

Strangely though the heavy barrage upon the island abruptly ceased. Colt got up and helped me up to my feet. The entire horizon was now lit up with the blinking lights of what appeared to be two navies at war with each other.

“Are they firing on each other?” I asked unbelievably, because that was how it appeared.

Who could the other fleet be comprised of in this sunken world?

Colt and I looked at each other in sudden comprehension and said in unison, “No way!”

It couldn't be, but the unexpected was to be expected down here.

Colt abruptly left my side to run down

to the shore and into the surf. What on Earth was he up to?

I saw him pull the scroll out of his belt. He tied a rock off to it and then he chucked both the rock and the scroll out into the ocean an impressively far distance.

Colt came back to me then and grasping my shoulders tightly he roughly said, “You’ve never seen or heard of an old scroll, got it!!!”

I nodded numbly unsure of anything right now.

“Why Colt?”

He looked off for a moment and then back to me, “I studied the scroll some.”

“How could you do that it’s in some script that I’ve never seen before?”

“I’m not sure how, but the words turned to English and I could read it. I

stopped within a few sentences though. It was bad! I mean bad in the dark evil variety kind of way!”

“What did it say?” I asked anxious to know.

“It was basically a treasure map for something old. Something better left buried going by what little I read. I stopped reading because it was like something was overcoming me the more I read the scroll. Like something within the scroll was compelling me to continue reading. It was almost hypnotic in the force that it exerted on me! When I realized how I was being drawn in I threw the scroll into the fire, but it wouldn't burn! Instead it started flashing. Now that I think about it I think it was flashing out an alert beacon.”

“Why would it do that?”

“I guess because it couldn’t control me. I rejected it and now it’s looking for a new master. Look! They’re coming! Whatever you do don’t breathe a word about the scroll Kim!”

I nodded, as I watched the not so foreign looking boats plow into the sand of the beach. We were suddenly surrounded by American clothed Marines from a different century.

Feature wise the men had elements of mixed heritage, a testament as to how their forefathers must’ve intermarried with the indigenous Polynesian peoples that seemed to have arrived to this sunken world first. The Japanese were likely no different in how they had maintained their numbers.

These two warring factions were far removed from the instigations of a

bygone war on the surface, but down here they were still apparently locked in a bitter proverbial war. Would the surprises of this place never end?

We were prodded at gunpoint down to the water where we were roughly pushed into boats, which were then shoved out into the surf.

Chapter Fifteen

Firing Squad

I stood shivering in the immaculately kept Captain's cabin of the ship that I had been thrust aboard just an hour previously. The man, I took to be the Captain, sat behind the desk that was before me. He idly sat there staring at me saying nothing for minutes on end.

Finally he spoke, "Where's the scroll of the ancients?"

I shook my head in my best impersonation of incomprehension, "What scroll?"

“Don’t play games with me! We know you had it with you on the island! We haven’t recorded such a signal from the scroll since it was last unearthed some fifty years ago! Now where is it?” The Captain said harshly as he rose from the desk and came around to stand in front of me.

I shook my head in mock cluelessness, “Sir, I and my companion just fell into this strange place from the world above! We’ve been doing everything we can to just survive! What makes you think that we know something, much less anything, to do with this.....”

The backhanded slap caught me unexpectedly and I fell backward to the floor my head ringing. I stayed where I was as I waited for my vision to stop being fuzzy and out of focus.

The Captain was squatting on the carpet beside of me and I glanced at him even as the taste of blood filled my mouth from my split lip.

The Captain shook his head, “You shouldn’t have made me do that, but I’m afraid I have no choice in the matter of forcing you to confession.”

I clearly did not like this man.

Adopting a genial tone at odds with what he’d just done to me the Captain asked, “Our predicament here is dire enough for me to do whatever it takes to make you talk and gain possession of that scroll.”

As he spoke his hand reached out to stroke the side of my face and I felt revulsion sweep through me at his touch. I had an intensely powerful urge to let him know just what I thought of him, but

I stuck to the plan.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! I am an American citizen and you have no right to treat me like this!”

“Tsk, tsk, this is true, but you see we’re no longer in America. Instead you’re here in this inner hell I call home and you’re going to tell us the location of what we need to win a war once and for all or.....” His voice trailed off as he gestured to a guard further back in the ship’s cabin.

The guard opened the door behind him to reveal a grisly scene. Colt was tied to a chair and covered in blood!

He didn’t look conscious and I prayed that he wasn’t already dead. Tears dripped off my face at the sight of him and I started to unconsciously move toward him, but the Captain held me

back and finished his threat, “or I cut this man’s eyeballs out and feed them to you!”

How could life be this cruel?

Colt’s bloodshot eyes opened and he moved his head almost imperceptibly in a negative shake, but I just couldn’t do it.

Crying I said, “We threw it out to sea weighted down with a rock near where you found us.”

The Captain patted my cheek as if I was a pet dog.

“Sorry about that dear, but it was necessary in order to bring about a greater good.”

The Captain addressed the other men in the room, “Patch him up and stow them in a cabin until we can verify their story.”

I was yanked to my feet and dragged

from the room.

“Colt!” I cried out, but I got no answer as I was hustled down the corridor only to be thrown into a cell like cabin.

There was nothing of use to defend myself with in the cell and the bulkhead door was closed tight. Crying I sank to my knees and did the only thing that I could do, I prayed.

I prayed for Colt. I prayed for myself. I prayed that we’d find a way out of this endless level of hell we’d fallen into!

Most of all I prayed for peace that everything was going to end out all right.

Four hours later the door opened to reveal the captain. He stepped into the small space and instantly I could see that he was seething mad with rage and I immediately expected the worst.

“Didn’t you find the scroll?” I asked,

as I felt dread begin to seep into my soul as to what was likely to happen next.

The Captain looked like he was about to explode, “We did and we didn’t! We found the rope with a rock tied off to it, but no scroll! The most important discovery to ever emerge of the ancients is now lost! Drifting on the tide who knows where all because of you and your lover! Take her up topside now!”

I was going to die, but strangely there was something that preoccupied my thinking more than dying at the moment.

“Why were the Japanese trying to destroy it, if it’s so valuable?”

“They were the first to discover it and they didn’t know what they were doing. They made a botched job of trying to implement it and then of all things they lost control of it to the Sea People!”

What he'd said didn't make much sense, but I guess it didn't really matter as my continued existence seemed to have come to an end.

I was led out onto the deck back into the orange glow of the shifting overhead clouds. I saw Colt already lined up against the railing and I rushed to him.

"I'm sorry Colt, but I couldn't let them hurt you anymore"

Colt stared back at me solemnly and said "That's how I feel about you. I'd have squealed the first moment they'd laid a fist to you."

"You would have?" I asked softly.

He shrugged, "Yeah. I'm pretty sure I'm in love with you Kim."

Tears spilled down my face as I looked up at him with my heart in my eyes, "I love you too Colt!"

His swollen lips parted in a smile and I tearfully followed suit with a watery one of my own.

The sound of bolt action receivers on rifles being engaged caused us to both glance over at the row of men bringing rifles up to aim at us.

I turned back to Colt and pressing close to him I said, "Hold me Colt!"

He was already holding me, but at my words his hold tightened. I couldn't help it as I began to cry again. It wasn't fair! It just wasn't fair!

"Kim!"

The urgency in Colt's voice shook me out of my misery and I glanced up to see the men with rifles lowering them.

Why were they doing that?

I glanced the other way and gasped and held on to Colt tighter. Before me

was a beast like no other!

It was a beast that looked an awfully lot like a mythical dragon in combination with the body of a dinosaur. It had partially pulled its great bulk up out of the sea and latched onto the ship's railing with its massive forepaws, which had crumpled the railing into a misshapen form of mangled steel that bespoke of awesome power.

I must've been really lost in my world of private sorrow not to have felt the ship dip over under the weight of the monster that clung to the side of it.

For a beast it seemed to possess a great intelligence, if it's imposing gaze that drifted back and forth over the ship's crew was any indicator to go by. Then most alarmingly of all, the beast spoke, "Where is the captain?"

Shaken hearted sailors pointed toward the bridge and the great head of the beast swiveled in that direction.

The voice of the beast spoke again more loudly than before, “You were warned of what would transpire if you continued to search for the scroll. Not only have you transgressed the will of my masters but you have also decided to add to your list of crimes the slaughter of innocents. You full well know that the Sea People are a tolerant people content to leave those on the surface to their own devices, but you have breached that etiquette by threatening the life of the sister of a Sea Prince and for that your life is required in return.”

No answer came back from the bridge that remained devoid of any visible life. The great head of the dragon swiveled

back to the petrified firing squad and spoke once more, “Bring him to me or this entire crew along with the ship will perish.”

Without hesitation the sailors rushed off and soon thereafter a bunch of them including officers of the ship brought the Captain to the forefront kicking and screaming. They thrust him to the deck beneath the great head of the dragon and drew back quickly from him.

The Captain looked up and cursed loudly for a moment before saying, “If I’d only found that scroll I would’ve had the means to boil you in a pot and serve you on my table!”

The dragon’s only response was to shake its head and say, “It would seem that some will never learn, no matter how much warning is given. The

knowledge of the scroll is corrupting and if it were possible my masters would have destroyed it long ago.”

The Captain hotly retorted back with, “You’re just trying to hold us back from our destiny! Everyone knows that the Sea People unlocked the technology of the scroll and have used it for their own gain!”

The dragon shook his head somberly, “The Sea People have no need of such dark words of import as they are content with who they are and with their lot in life, which is something that you would have done well to learn. Perhaps if you had, then there would not be this proverbial war that continues to ravage the peoples above water. Your crime for continuing the search of the scroll has been noted and by order of the Sea

People you have been committed to the Undersea prison of Lagro.

Without further ado the dragon suddenly leaned near and snatched the Captain up with his teeth and tossed him into the upturned waves around the ship. The Captain screamed and flailed about, but abruptly was dragged under by some unseen force.

The great head of the dragon swiveled back to us and I drew closer to Colt even as my mouth turned dry in expectation of what would come next.

“Your brother is alive and well and I have been instructed to tell you that he will meet with you soon. You will be returned to the island that you were taken from.”

At those words the great head inclined towards the bridge of the ship and

dutifully the ship changed course.

Completely at a loss for words I managed to get out with enough volume to form a question, “My brother is alive and well?” I asked both disbelievingly and hopefully.

“He is and he has been made a Prince of the Sea People, by virtue of his selection as a mate by a daughter of the King.”

Wow! It sounded like Keko had been having his own time of it in this strange world. He was a Prince married to the daughter of a king!

“Why didn’t he come? I want to see him!”

“He is coming. He will meet with you on the island soon. He may be your brother but now he is also the Prince of a great people with the responsibilities

that come with the role of leadership. The release of the scroll once again has caused a crisis of search. Should such a scroll fall into the wrong hands a disaster of epic proportions could result. A disaster that could affect all the people of this inner world and even the world above. This ship will take you back to the island now.”

Without further words the massive dragon let loose of the ship and sank beneath the waves.

Talking dragons! What could be next? I shuddered at the possibility of that.

We stayed where we were by the railing unmolested by the ship's crew, who appeared only too eager to return us to our island.

I stood there on the beach watching as the dingy that had brought us here headed back out to sea. Had all this upheaval really turned a complete cycle in less than 24 hours to see me back on this beach with Colt?

I looked to Colt and I felt tears of tiredness and emotion seep out of the corners of my eyes. He looked awful, but he was here alive and we were together and that was more than I had ever hoped for after being taken from the beach the first time.

I went to him and wrapped my arms around him and his came around me. I buried my face in his shirt loving the security and warmth of his presence.

Colt spoke in a choked tone that had me looking up quickly, “Back there I

thought I was going to lose you. I.....I don't want that to ever happen.”

Looking into his eyes I saw my future and with emotion equal to his I said, “Neither do I!”

I wanted to kiss him, but I was so short and the sand gave way beneath my toes as I tried to reach him. I abruptly found myself lifted free of the sand and pushed back against the trunk of a tree, as Colt's hands bore me up and held me there.

Eyes tightly shut I accepted the brutal kiss of passion that was pressed upon me. The force he kissed me with hurt, but I didn't care. It was as if all the longing and passion within Colt had been unleashed in a torrent of raw need and I reveled in it, because I was the recipient of all of his strongest desires.

It was heady to feel how much he wanted me and I felt overwhelmed by the outpouring of need for him that his kiss and touch awakened within me with every passing moment. My legs curled around his waist and I held onto the powerful shoulders that had my strength many times over in ability.

I knew where this was headed and I wasn't doing anything to stop it. No, instead, I was doing everything I could to encourage him.

I left being upright against a tree trunk to suddenly feeling myself being pressed into the sand. This was right. This was so right!

The old headman of the island turned

away from the beach and the couple who lay on it to make his way back into the forest and to the village beyond. His face was wreathed in a smile even as his soul felt at peace.

Change was coming. Change for the better. He had known that ever since the girl from above, who was like his people had come to them.

Change however would have to wait for a little while the old man thought to himself. A native boy passed him in route for the beach, but the old headman waved him off. There were to be no interruptions of the couple that lay on the beach experiencing love.

He explained as much to the people of the village and they looked at him askance as the concept of giving privacy to a lovemaking couple was not of their

tradition. The headman insisted all the more vehemently, as he helped usher in the change to his people that he knew the girl and the God, who had given him a vision of the future, would bring to them.

The ship heaved to and there was a plop as the castoff rope landed in the water with a splash. The attempt was unsuccessful, but the second attempt snared the prize.

The rope was pulled back in and up the side to the throng of curious onlookers. The rope thrower's hands had no sooner secured his prize than it was wrestled out of his hands by a violet jerk of another's.

“Ere clear back now ya scurvy swine

and let Captain Sally give it a look!”

The pirate crew only for a brief twinkling of time held back before they closed in to stare at the unrolled scroll in the Captain’s hands from overtop one of her bony shoulders. Captain Sally squinted at the scroll before her, but she had no head for numbers and letters, an X was good enough for her.

“Hey we’re ya be Swogs? Get yourself over here before I’ze cut something off of ya you’ll miss!”

The wizened up little pirate called Swogs was pushed forward through the curious group of onlookers.

“Read what it says man and tells us what the pretty shiny paper says.”

Swogs did as ordered and as he read the scroll began to glow more and more brightly. Almost for a match to the

scroll's brightness was the avarice that gleamed from the eyes of the listening crowd.

Captain Sally held up a hand and Swogs stopped reading.

Captain Sally turned with a cruel smile to her crew of cutthroat's and said, "Boys I believe I can see how it'll be. What a day it is for a blimey lot of scum such as we! Stand lively and weigh anchor for we be soon about a change of fortune! Soon we be the masters of Undersea!"

The crew roared out in raucous agreement and threw themselves into the efforts of getting the old galley up to top speed. The pirate crew sang out in a lusty ditty as the pirate galley reached a speed it hadn't seen in years.

Captain Sally closed the door of her

cabin and shoved Swogs into a chair that looked about to collapse.

“Now you be a telling me the rest of what that piece of fancy writing has to say now that we got a bit of privacy!”

Swogs looked up from the scroll, “I don’t be a thinking that there is much more to be a saying rather than there is to be a swearing.”

Captain Sally tossed an old mug at the man as she burst out with distemper, “Make sense or I’ll be a dunking your foul hide into the briny to be a shark’s play toy! Don’t you be a thinking to fool the likes of me!”

Swogs now with his face damp with sweat, which only served to smear the grime of his unwashed features the more stammered out in a rush, “There’s plenty to read! I only was a meaning to say that

it says you got to swear as to what it's saying.”

“Ahh you daft man why didn't you tell me so? Be on with it then and tells me what old Sally be a needing to swear to for by golly I will be a doing it!”

Obediently Swogs read out what the scroll said to be sworn to and with a cackle Captain Sally sat back in her chair and swore to every last thing that was read aloud.

Time went by and Swog's nervousness increased as he felt the ship seem to skip over the waves, and watched the Captain not quite be herself. She'd never been good, but now..... well he'd had to stop looking at her for she gave him the chill.

Suddenly Captain Sally stood and came around the table to him. Swogs

drew back in fear and was about to get up, when her hand caught him by the throat with a strength beyond her own that found its root of force in the hell of the demon that she'd sworn in.

“Ahhh Swogs I ain't going to be needing you to say anymore, because I can read it for myself now. We'll keep this our little secret you and me won't we.”

It had not been Captain Sally's voice that had spoken and Swogs died painfully to the tune of a laugh issued forth from hell itself. Many a pirate topside looked toward the deck hatch in consternation of what had caused the sound they'd all heard emanating from the Captain's quarters.

Chapter Sixteen

Battle Plans

Captain Hiro Akima glanced up as the orderly ran into the bridge and hastily saluted. Captain Hiro returned the salute before barking out, “Report!”

The orderly stammered out the ill news, “It is as you feared Sir. The scroll has been found and activated.”

Captain Hiro’s face darkened as he bitterly spit out, “There will be no stopping the Americans now! The war is over and we are all dead men!”

With that said the Captain abruptly

turned away from the orderly and the room full of officers. He stared out over the ocean before him and then up at the orange sky.

He supposed it was fitting in a way. It had been them once who had intended on unleashing the dark power that the scroll contained against the Americans. Thankfully they had been stopped, but would the Sea People be able to stop the Americans or was all hell about to break loose?

Now all that was left to do was to somehow inspire his men against the inevitable. And for what? An honorable death was the best that any of them could hope for now.

“Sir?..... Sir?”

The voice of the orderly impinged into the Captain's private sorrow.

Impatiently he turned back from the forward windows to the orderly, “Yes, is there more?”

“It’s not the Americans Sir, at least we don’t think so.”

The Captain’s full attention re-centered on the orderly, “Then who?” He barked out at the man.

The orderly looked on the verge of passing out and the Captain immediately regretted his harshness, but he had to know!

In a more controlled tone the Captain asked, “Who?”

The orderly choked the one-word answer out, “Pirates.”

The room went deathly still as officers and sailors alike looked at each other in horror.

The Captain silently turned back to the

forward windows.

Pirates!

This was worse than being on the losing side of a war. Now everyone would die.

The Captain turned back to the orderly, “Have they headed for the city?”

“Yes Sir. They’re almost there. If we had but been closer we could have been able to cut them off, but.....”

The Captain held his hand up cutting off the useless words of the messenger. Without saying anything he walked from the stillness of those gathered in the bridge and out onto the swaying platform of the over deck. He stared down at the sailors working on the deck below and then out at the choppy waters beyond the keel of the ship.

What should he do?

What could even be done?

As bad and as costly in lives as his proverbial war had been between them and the Americans, both sides of the conflict had been unified in their fight against the pirates. The pirates in this Undersea world were something worse than human.

What they did to the people who fell down from above and what they'd done to the native populations of the islands for centuries was unconscionable. Both his people and the Americans had declared the natives off-limits for the pirates. In return for being safeguarded from the pirates the natives resupplied both sides of the armed conflict between them and the Americans.

Strangers who fell down from the

above world were given a choice as to whose side they wished to join without punishment. While there was an ongoing war that had stretched on for many years it had been at times a rather amicable one with neither side pressing for the kill.

The pirates would be different. Their lust for power and revenge for all the long years of being hunted unmercifully by both sides would translate into a bloodbath of epic proportions now that they had the power behind the scroll.

The Captain's head began to shake back and forth as he gripped the railing hard. So many would die.

The Captain's head lifted on a sudden realization. The sunken city that was the pirates primary objective was near an inhabited island. The pirates would.....

The people of that island would be the first casualties if they were not warned. Even then what did it matter?

The Captain left the railing decisively, because it did matter. It mattered as long as he was alive to do something about it.

He reentered the bridge, which immediately dimmed to a hushed murmur as they all looked to him expectantly.

“Helmsman turn us around and head for Bonady island. The people there need to be warned. We will assist with their evacuation.”

“Then what Sir?” An officer within the bridge asked.

The Captain shook his head and said, “I’m not sure, but we’ll start with doing the obvious thing that we do know to do. We can at least do that.”

The officer who’d asked the question

nodded affirmatively.

Sudden emotion caused the lean jaw of the Captain to tick and pulse and everyone waited with bated breath.

The Captain turned to the first radio sailor man, "Sailor I want you to send an all points broadcast of what the situation is and what our current strategy is. Our strategy is to evacuate the first island to be hit by the pirates once they've realized all of their power and are ready to move."

"Yes Sir!"

"Sailor." The Captain said steadily.

"Yes Sir?"

"I also want you to send the broadcast in English without any encryption as well."

The sailor blinked and swallowed and looked at his Captain as if he thought

he'd misheard him.

A junior officer spoke up, "Sir you can't mean to....."

The Captain cut the officer off with a hand gesture as he maintained eye contact with the radioman, "Send it."

The sailor nodded and saluted, "Yes Sir."

The Captain turned from the sweating sailor to address the room of officers and upper class sailor men.

"We have no time for this foolish war with the Americans anymore. There can only be one war now!"

Captain Hiro paused for effect as he met select pairs of eyes around the room in a hard stare that was unrelenting, "The war to survive!" He finished brutally and those within the room straightened and came to attention.

“Message has been sent and received Sir.” The radioman called out.

“Good!” The Captain said before turning around to face the windows once more.

He called out, “Full speed ahead.”

“Full speed it is Sir!” Called out the helmsman.

I lay against Colt basking in the warmth of the day and the smell of his skin. The curly hairs of his chest tickled my nose so I moved my hand to lay between us.

Him being so hairy wasn't really a big deal as it was just another part of who he was, but I had to admit that his hairs had a way of their own as to where they

landed up. I opened my mouth and picked one of them from off my tongue.

The chest beneath my face shook as Colt chuckled. In an apologetic tone Colt said, "Sorry."

I turned my head and looked up at him smiling dreamily, "Don't be. I don't mind."

He rolled his eyes at me like he thought I was telling a lie and in all seriousness I insisted, "Colt I really don't mind."

His eyes came back to mine and I caught sight of a seemingly delicate emotion for such a brawny man as he to manifest.

"You don't?" He asked hesitantly.

I responded with a firm shake of my head no.

He didn't quite look convinced so I

ran my hand through the thick curls of his chest hair and said, “You’re so manly looking. I like it. I wouldn’t change anything about you other than to dial down your stubbornness level some.” I said teasingly.

He didn’t really play along with my tease though. Instead he had a look of relief, as if he’d barely managed to come through some kind of hurdle. Was he really that sensitive about his body image?

“Did you get teased a lot about your hairiness growing up?” I asked softly.

The corresponding look in his eyes spoke volumes in terms of an answer to my question.

I leaned down and kissed his hairy chest, “I’m sorry that was the case Honey.”

I felt him relax under me and in a way I felt our new relation with each other deepen.

“They always referred to me as the ape man.”

I raised my head and noticed the buried layers of hurt in his eyes. How could I change this remembrance of the past into something positive?

“Ape man huh?” I said slowly.

He nodded in affirmation and again I felt the body beneath me tense in anger.

“Well you have to say Colt you are pretty strong, but that’s where the similarities end. You’re all man! My man!”

I felt him relax again and with confidence he said, “And you’re my woman.”

Feeling playful all of the sudden I

pushed away from him and said as I rose to my feet, "Only if you can catch me!"

He lunged for me but I danced back out of reach and turned to run. He got a hand on my ankle that sent me toppling into the sand. Giggling I sprang back up and continued to run not wanting the chase to be over too soon.

I ran through a patch of jungle and burst out upon another section of beach. I was breathing hard and despite my best efforts I was still laughing, which was hampering my efforts to escape, but then I wasn't really trying to escape.

I glanced back and saw that Colt was about thirty feet behind me. He came to an abrupt stop and began to stare intently at something that was out ahead of me.

My merriment of the chase fled as I came to a stumbling halt myself. My

head whipped back around to see what new danger Colt had seen, but my straining eyes took in nothing but the empty beach and the sea beyond.

I didn't get it. What had he seen?

"Gotcha!" I heard Colt exclaim in triumph even as I was snatched off my feet and held above the ground in the strong clasp of his arms from behind.

I couldn't believe it! He'd tricked me! What a dirty rotten trick!

"Hey ! Hey! Simmer down Kim!" Colt said, even as I felt a barely restrained laugh ripple throughout him.

"You scared me!" I said in an angry tone, as I struggled to get free.

"You know I like how feisty you are." Colt said against my neck even as he continued to hold me off the ground bound up in his powerful arms.

Just like that the mood of my capture switched from outrage to the passion that I felt for the man who held me.

I turned my head to whisper an endearment into his neck, but to my surprise he was nonresponsive. I pulled back from his neck to see him looking back over my shoulder all of his attention seemingly elsewhere.

Slowly he spoke, “Kim you need to see this!”

“Yeah right! I’m only falling for that one once!” I said sardonically.

He kept up with the staring fixatedly over my shoulder so I decided to up the bet and say something into his ear that I didn’t think he would be able to resist from doing with me. My lips opened.....

“I knew that I left you in good hands.”

My head whipped back forward as I stared in shock at the man who was approaching out of the waves of the ocean.

“Koke!!!” I screamed out as my feet landed on the sand as Colt released me.

I was running and then I was holding my brother and he was holding me back just as tightly. After a long moment I pulled back blinking away tears of joy, “Oh Koke your alive!”

Then I added, as I noticed something different about him, “You’re different Koke. What’s changed?”

His face was still wreathed in a friendly open smile that had his former way about it, “Call it responsibility. I’m a prince and I’m married.”

In shock I followed his hand gesture where further out to sea a blonde who

could only be termed as gorgeous, briefly stood up out of the waves followed by a score of others. The blonde smiled and waved and somehow I felt her words of welcome within my head. Just like that the Sea People re-submerged and the surface of the sea was once again flat with only the ripple of the waves to be seen.

I blinked. This couldn't all be truly happening could it? My brother lived underwater and was a Prince?

My eyes came back to Koke's only to see him regarding me with a knowing smile.

“You've changed a lot yourself dear sister.”

I blushed red as I took the obvious drift of his meaning even as he added, “And you're a lot better for it!”

He took my hand then and started leading me toward Colt with a sense of command that I had never seen him manifest before.

I gasped, “Koke! You’re back!”

“Ahh, never mind that, all healed now anyway. Come, we have important things to discuss.”

Koke pulled me along until we came to a stop before Colt who was smiling. Koke leaned forward and slapped Colt on the back in a manly gesture that I’d never seen him manifest so overtly before.

“Thanks for looking out after the little sister! I’m sure it wasn’t easy to start!”

Colt gave me a knowing look and then with a cocky smile he said, “It’s been worth it.”

I blushed even as Koke laughed. Colt

was going to pay for that later, but right now all I wanted to know was what was happening that Koke seemed so serious upon discussing.

Koke continued on up the beach and into the jungle and I hurried after him. What was the rush for?

“What’s going on Koke?” I asked breathlessly as I hurried through the narrow strip of jungle towards the opposing beach on the other side

“Going on!” Koke burst out with as we stepped free of the jungle onto the beach.

“Goodness don’t you know? Oh, I guess you don’t. The pirates got a hold of the scroll. There’s a second war about to break loose in this little fallen paradise we now call home. A war just to survive most likely.” Koke finished

with grimly.

Colt broke into the conversation from Koke's other side, "I'm sorry! I....."

Koke held up a hand forestalling Colt from going any further in apology, "You couldn't have known Colt. No one is blaming you; even the Sea People have something of a stake in all this. They freely admit now that they should have either destroyed or hidden the scroll much better than they did. Down here there's a little blame that belongs to everyone. Isn't that right Captain Hiro?"

With a gasp I pulled up and let go of Koke's hand as I took in the Japanese Captain accompanied by a group of officers standing in the sand before their beached boats. The entire Japanese Navy lay at anchor in the background just offshore.

Both Colt and I shared a glance of intense meaning. We were going to need to plan our little get-togethers a little better in the future, if we expected to have any privacy.

Captain Hiro nodded his head forward in a perfunctory bow, which was soon followed by the rest of his officers in attendance. It was very clear that the Sea People that Koke was now a part of held the balance of power in this underworld realm.

I wondered why that was and then I remembered the talking dragon. With a beast like that at their command it made sense why there was this show of respect. Respect directed at my brother. I'd never been more proud of him. We'd both come a long way from our childhood beginnings.

I watched as the Japanese Captain drew close to my brother stopping only two feet away from him. Koke introduced who Colt and I were to the Captain.

I couldn't but feel that along with Colt that I was somehow to blame for the risk to so many lives that having unearthed the scroll had resulted in. What my brother had said about everyone having a share in the guilt had helped, but it had been Colt and I that had released the threat of the dark natured message of the scroll back into this sunken realm.

The Captain, I'm not sure how, seemed to sense my guilt over the situation. In heavily accented English he spoke, "You have not been the first to succumb to the wiles of the dark words and threaten to unleash their unholy

offspring. Over thirty years ago a junior Captain of a destroyer in our fleet found the scroll washed up on a beach not far from here. He read the words of the scroll and bonded himself with a manifestation of sheer evil. An evil that I wished to never have to face again. The inhabiting manifestation of evil offered his knowledge of a sunken city filled with the means by which we could use to win our war with the Americans overnight if we would but allow possession of ourselves by the dark forces. My Admiral did not see why we should stoop to such dark paths in the pursuit of victory. We were winning the war against the Americans anyway. The Admiral was a man of honor, as am I. Most of the fleet agreed with the Admiral, and the manifestation of evil

was denied access to our souls. In retaliation the possessed young Captain stole on board the capital battleship and killed the Admiral in his sleep. He then tried to gain control of the battleship, but the crew resisted and would not take orders from him. In the fighting between the crew of the old Admiral's and that of the upstart Captain's crew a fire got started, it touched off a powder magazine and our battleship, which was the pride of our fleet went up in flames taking with it the lives of over eight hundred sailors. The rebel Captain's ship was also destroyed. The loss of those sailors and those two ships has been a costly one. Ever since that day we have been at a disadvantage to the Americans and forced to flee every fight we have encountered with them. The

ancient scroll is poison of the worst kind and must be destroyed!” The Captain finished passionately as he turned to look at Koke pointedly.

Koke nodded affirmatively, “The scroll will be destroyed this time Captain. I have the pledge of the Sea People to that end. Now on to the pressing matter at hand. You’ve come to evacuate the island I take it?”

The Captain nodded affirmatively, but Koke shook his head in denial of the Captain’s expressed action.

“We can’t focus on such efforts right now Captain. We need to strike the pirates now, while their newfound powers are not quite realized if we have any hope of seizing the scroll away from them.”

The Captain’s face looked strained for

a moment as he contemplated what Koke was asking of him.

“You are suggesting that I commit my fleet to open confrontation with the pirates?”

Koke nodded grimly.

“Such an action would be an act of suicide, if they’ve uncovered even just a part of what the scroll implied was buried in the city!”

“Even so Captain the battle is before us. The Sea People need your fleet to act as a diversion, while we do what we can beneath the waves. Are you in or out?”

A long moment stretched out then, which Koke broke with, “Captain Hiro we don’t have much time.”

The Captain looked down with a frown at the sand specks sticking to his

otherwise immaculate looking boots. His tone reflective sounding he said, “We’re dead if we don’t and dead if we do.”

The Captain looked up to stare directly into Koke’s eyes for a moment before flatly saying, “We’re in. It is better to die in honor than to be hunted down and raped individually into a state of defeat. We will fight!”

Koke reached forward to grip the lean Captain’s shoulder, “Thank you Captain! Give us four hours to get our people into position before you make your approach on the city.”

The Captain nodded and started to leave, when not being able to hold back what I felt burdened to say any longer I said, “We should pray.”

All eyes turned to me. Swallowing down my apprehension at so many direct

stares upon me I said, “It would seem that our chance for victory is a slim one. I just thought it wouldn’t hurt to seek a little Divine favor.”

Koke nodded in affirmation and glanced to the Captain, who looked decidedly uncomfortable.

The Captain spoke haltingly, “I gave up the belief in my gods long ago, as have most of my men, but if you wish to pray to your God I will listen.”

I nodded and started into a prayer that I hoped covered the situation we were faced with, but what was more important than that was I prayed what I did with all of my heart.

Some distant part of me couldn’t believe that I was leading such a diverse group as was gathered on this beach in prayer.

The prayer finished I opened my eyes to see Koke smiling warmly at me and the Captain looking puzzled about something. Colt; however, was gone!

My frantic eyes turned to Koke and I asked, "Where did Colt go?"

He pointed out behind me and I looked to where he pointed only to see Colt approaching the outlying reef in a native dugout canoe. What was he doing?

I started to scream out to him, but Koke restrained me by grasping my arm.

"He wouldn't hear you."

"Where's he going Koke? He can't be going for the scrolls alone can he?"

"No, the sunken city is in the opposite direction. I think he's going for help."

"Help? From who?"

Then it came to me, "But they tried to

kill us!” I exclaimed, as I remembered my time spent with the American Navy.

Koke shook his head, “I don’t see much hope in it, but it’s best to let him try.”

The native dugout’s small square sail came out and the little vessel shot out for the open ocean. I felt tears course down my cheeks as I watched the little boat disappear quickly. He hadn’t even said goodbye.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and I turned to find that the touch had been that of the Japanese Captain.

“Would you care to come aboard? This island will not be any safer than our ships if we fail in the fight to come. Perhaps your strong prayers may provide my men the inspiration to fight harder. I can see that you believe

everything that you do and that inner confidence could be of great value for my men to see.”

I wiped at my tears even as I was inwardly overwhelmed by the Captain's confidence in my praying ability. I'd only been praying for a few weeks now. What measure of strength did he think I possessed, but then I guess it wasn't my strength that he was noticing. The knowledge that my life was reflecting my Savior was in turn confidence inspiring to me.

“I thought you said you didn't have faith Captain?”

“I don't, but it is clear to me that you do. Perhaps my former faith was wrong. Anyway I would like to see more of your faith in action.”

I fought against being overwhelmed by

the Captain's confidence in my faith. A simple message held true within the confines of my mind. If victory was to be achieved and miracles performed it would only be by the grace of God and not by any act of mine.

I felt an urging from within to go with the Captain, but I hesitated.

I turned to Koke, but he was no help.

"It would be as good a spot as any to be Sis."

I looked back to the Captain and nodded. He saluted and headed for the boat that had brought him and his officers ashore.

I gave Koke a brief hug, which he returned to the extent that I thought he was about to crack my ribs. The strength of his hug helped to express without words what needed to be said. There

was no time for words anyway.

I turned from Koke and caught up with the Captain's boat as two sailors started pushing it into the surf.

Koke watched his sister for a moment as he said a prayer of his own. He turned from the retreating boat to head for the other shore where he walked into the waves and was soon gone from view.

“That'll do boys! Heave the old brig still!” Captain Sally barked out.

The old galley came to a sluggish stop. The crew glanced among themselves at a loss over what had

possessed the Captain to stop here of all places. All they saw was open water all around with not even the hint of an island on the horizon. The sea was empty.

Captain Sally shook her head at their looks of consternation. They were as stupid as she had been once, but no more!

She felt alive with the secret hidden knowledge that had blossomed within her. Stupid or not she needed the crew to cooperate and help her. The scroll had told her that she could expect direct interference from the Sea People and possibly others.

Captain Sally stretched her hands out to the water and spoke the dark words of the scroll.

As the words formed out past her lips

they seemed to burn through her heart. Instead of sensing further loss of spirit all she felt was the promise of the power that the words would bring.

The words had been said and glancing around, Captain Sally saw that her villainous crew was impressed as they'd never been before with her. There was a good reason for that as she'd never put so many words together before in one unbroken sentence as she had just done.

The crew's focus on her was broken by the sound of breaching seawater behind her. She spun around back to the railing to behold the action taking place in the formally empty scene of open water.

Tall spires of a city's architecture unparalleled by any in the modern era punched clear of the waves to rise up

once more into the daylight after a long absence from the realm of the living. Towering spires gave way to a city the likes of which none of the pirates could ever have dreamed possible in terms of size and awe inspiring appeal.

“Feast upon the sight of our salvation boys! It is Lemuria itself, that ancient city of old, second only to Atlantis and it’s ours ripe for the taking! With the power of this city behind us we can conquer all who oppose us! There will be no more meddling in our affairs or running from the likes of Sea People or fancy navy captains bent on blowing us to hell! We will rule here in Undersea and we alone!”

Her crew echoed her excitement and looked about ready to jump over the side and discover the emerging city for

themselves.

“Whoa boys not so fast! If you are to take yonder city and enjoy its wonders then ya got to be a pledging yourself to the cause as I have.”

“What cause be that Captain Sally?”
One burly pirate asked suspiciously.

Captain Sally didn't take offense at his question, but shot right back with, “Why it's rebellion my lob eared floozy! Rebellion it is I say. That be my cause. Rebellion against God and man and any pathetic rules there may be!”

A pirate to the side of the pirate who'd just asked the first question burst out with, “Well dat be our lives now Captain Sally!”

Captain Sally gave a loud cackle in return and said, “Why so it be!”

Her face went from merriment to dead

seriousness in the next instance as she said in a tone that didn't quite seem her own, "Now repeat after me and don't any of ya's leave a word out of this binding covenant!"

Half mesmerized by the city beyond and eager to explore it to discover what booty it may hold the crew repeated after the Captain and lost all hold on reality. Pledged over and demons welcomed in the weak natured pirates gave way to the vain personalities that hungered for even more conquest than they had.

The first road of conquest was to regain control of the city. As one the possessed pirates leaped over the side and began swimming for the fully emerged city that glistened beckoningly before them. The scroll lay discarded on

the deck of the old galley no longer needed or of any worth. It was now blank and void of any of its former abilities

There was something that not even the Sea People had grasped about the scroll, which was where it had gotten its luminescent power. The demons of the past in an effort to preserve themselves and avoid the Deep had bound themselves as a last resort to the scroll itself.

They were chained no longer. Craftily they had avoided the deadly deluge that had destroyed so many of their kind. They'd even survived the trip into the sunken realm within the Earth itself, ever waiting for that someone who would completely read them out of the scroll and give them a new habitation in which

to dwell.

They'd found their hosts at last and now all they could feel as they swam for the city was hunger. They hungered to destroy, pillage, and wreck human lives. It was after all their destiny and point of being.

Chapter Seventeen

At War

“The city is completely risen Sir!”

“Yes, I believe I can see that for myself.” Captain Hiro commented dryly in response to his first officer’s observation.

“Form battle line and signal all commanders to commence firing upon the city when they see us start the engagement. There will be no retreat!”

The signal man saluted and I watched from my vantage point at the back of the bridge as the fleet, small as it was,

flared out to the sides of the capital ship. The fleet was eighteen ships strong. Three cruisers, eight destroyers, and some smaller class vessels.

All the ships showed their age despite the painstaking detail that had been spent on them in order to keep them in good working order well beyond the expiration dates of their counterparts on the surface of the above world. Would this little outdated fleet from a bygone war be enough to take out a city unlike any other that had risen from the waves and even now seemed to be coming alive before us?

Our chances didn't look good and I deepened into the fervency of my prayer for our success the closer we got to the alien looking environment ahead of us. This city, though beautiful to behold, had

a feel to it that stirred against my soul and all I could sense was that things were getting darker.

I switched tactics in that I prayed for the souls of the sailors sailing head on into a confrontation with evil more so than I had been previously praying for the success of our battle plan. I prayed like I never had before.

Strangely I wasn't worried about my own role in all of this. I knew where I was going if I died and that knowledge gave me peace, but these sailors.....They didn't know my God and the knowledge of that caused my soul to cry out in mourning for those who would be lost before they had the chance to experience redeeming life through my Savior and an eternity spent with Him.

To make matters worse I had the

awful feeling that none of us were going to make it. The feeling of darkness all around was too great to believe that survival was even possible.

Captain Hiro glanced away from the female civilian. She was doing what he'd asked her to and he could literally feel the success of her efforts in the air around him. The contrast of holy righteousness versus darkness incarnate was exposed for any who had an eye to see. If he survived this day he would speak to her about her faith in the God that she served so wholeheartedly.

He glanced up at the shifting clouds overhead, they had a grey cast to them. There was going to be a storm today and

he was about to start it.

“All batteries commence firing!”

The flagship's forward gun batteries belched flame and gunpowder smoke as they touched off in a perfect synchronization of action and power. In an echoing reverb the rest of the fleet fired, even as they continued to press forward at top speed. The salvo of lead tipped explosive rounds touched down with deafening force onto the city, which still appeared for the most part to be lifeless.

It had taken longer to make repairs than expected for the possessed pirate crew, but now systems were coming back online one after the other in

readiness to deal with their attackers.

One pirate screamed in an inhuman wail of anger and Captain Sally lifted her head with a baleful glare, “What is it?” She demanded.

“They’ve managed to take out our shields with that first salvo, but we do still have full weapon access.”

“Do it then! Kill them all!” Captain Sally screeched back in reply.

Screens came alive with firing options imprinted in a language that hadn’t been seen since the great flood had transpired on the world above.

“Incoming Sir!”

The flagship shuddered and bucked heavy in the water as effervescent power

bolts slammed into the forward gun battery mounts. Smoke filled the bridge, as explosions rocked through the ship.

“Forward guns out of action Sir! Reports of multiple fires!”

“Send fire control units to deal with it, but do not stop the fight! Message the fleet to prepare and initiate evasive maneuvers!”

Captain Hiro turned back and looked through one of the forward windows just in time to see one of his destroyers get blown apart into a terrific fireball of molten steel and human debris. Seconds later another destroyer on the other end of the line went up in flames as the first one had. The companion cruiser of the flagship cruiser was taking heavy damage as well.

Captain Hiro turned to the helmsman

and barked out, “Bring us off to the side of the city and bring our rearward gun batteries into range!”

The helmsman attacked the wheel and spun it over so that the cruiser plowed off to the left in an abrupt turn even as the rear battery mounts swiveled over the side of the ship ready to fire. Water spray blasted upward terrifically where an energy salvo shot off from the city plowed into the watery position of where the ship would have been before it diverted from its course at the Captain’s bequest.

Captain Hiro hit the bulkhead beside of him triumphantly, “Fire!”

The rear batteries belched flame and caused the ship to plow sideways in the water for a moment from the repercussion of having been fired. The

gun's heavy payloads streaked toward the city through the fog of kicked up water that for the moment obscured the city from view.

“Again!” The Captain roared out with, but the command was not needed as the rear batteries had never desisted from hammering out explosively. The flagship started to make its way past the one side of the city. A city that was showing the damage of their shots upon it, but damaged or not the city's tall towers had not ceased to spew their deadly colored light.

“Sir we've lost half the fleet! Permission to call off the attack Sir?”

Captain Hiro barked out, “Arrest that man and get me somebody up here who has a spine! Continue the attack!” He ordered out even as the first officer was

dragged from the bridge.

On the other side of the city the second cruiser went up in a ball of flame. Moments later a destroyer directly behind the flagship went up to.

Captain Hiro gripped the railing as the ship bucked beneath him at the impact of more direct hits from the blazing towers that dominated the high-rise landscape of the city. It wouldn't be long now, Captain Hiro admitted to himself.

There was a sudden flurry of explosions from the opposite side of the city proper and Captain Hiro saw one of the towers go down. Everyone in the bridge rushed to the other side only to see that the source of the explosions had originated from their arch nemesis the Americans.

The American ships were streaming

into the battle guns blazing from Captain Hiro's former position of attack. Soon there would be ships on both sides of the city and that would be a good thing as the energy blasts from the towers would have to be diverted between the two fleets.

The Americans seemed to be as much a surprise to those manning the city as to the Japanese fleet. More explosions expanded about the city as the Americans pumped a second salvo into it.

The Americans had more firepower as their fleet consisted of twenty-one ships, but more importantly they had two Iowa Class battleships equipped with sixteen inch diameter gun turrets forward and aft. Those sixteen inch shells were falling on the city with deadening force.

Another tower spewing power bolts left and right went down, but there were still so many towers left. An American destroyer went up in pieces and a battleship got hit hard, but its forward batteries continued to belch flame impressively as they fired blindly through the black smoke that wreathed up from the forward decks of the ship.

The moment of open conflict was surreal and Captain Hiro saw the scene of hell on water as if it were a slow-moving opera of deadly motion for a second. Neither they nor the Americans had ever engaged in such open outright warfare before.

They had only fought slight skirmishes through the years, but this was something else entirely. This was all out war, only the Americans weren't firing on them,

but rather with them.

So many were dying. So many were already dead. The death count would only continue to rise as guns blazed and energy bolts sizzled, but Captain Hiro could not deny the beauty of open conflict as men gave it their all and made the ultimate sacrifice out of loyalty to protect those who would lose their lives in grotesque and inhumane ways if this battle was lost.

Captain Hiro pulled himself as if partly reluctant from his quiet interlude found within the hectic hell of the battle to call out to the signal man, “Single what’s left of the fleet to shoot through the gaps of the Americans as they make their move to circle around the city as we just did! Then tell those who are able to continue the fight to circle back and

attack the city once again after we've made the turn!"

"Yes Sir!"

Captain Hiro left the bridge to go out onto the forward deck. The repercussions of many guns was deafening within this hallowed amphitheater of war and gunpowder smoke. It was an infectious feeling of triumph to hear the heavy resistance of firepower and smell the defiance of each powder laden shot on the breeze.

An American destroyer slipped by and Captain Hiro found himself lifting a hand in a salute to the captain of the American ship. How did that old Roman saying go, *'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.'* That was certainly the case today!

The hard-hit American battleship was

listing heavy in the water, but it continued to plow blindly on towards the city with all guns blazing. It was a kamikaze run and Captain Hiro took his hat off in reverence to the ship and its crew for their bravery. His sign of reverence was echoed by every other officer and sailor in attendance.

The injured American battlewagon didn't make its target. The enemy, as if sensing the threat a collision would affect upon the city centered all outgoing fire from the city on the battleship that was approaching head on.

The explosion was so great that it literally lifted the battleship out of the water for a moment and then burning debris sloughed across the face of the water in every direction. The shockwave from the blast blew all those gathered at

the railing backward against the bridge.

The Americans continued in their approach of slipping around the city to take up the Japanese fleet's former position of attainment. Their number was down by half.

Tears in his eyes Captain Hiro turned away from the burning oil field that was all that was left of nearly a thousand brave men. He reentered the bridge at almost the same moment that the cruiser took several more hard hits from the city's towers.

Fires had broken out both forward and aft and he thought he even felt the sound of deeper inner explosions within the ship. For a moment he thought they'd go up in flame, but the explosions stopped.

Coughing he got back up to his feet and staggered to the com tube.

“Damage control report!” He bellowed down the pipe.

It took a moment, but a voice made harsh by smoke and exertion came back wearily, “Its bad Sir! We’re taking on seawater, but the pumps are handling it for now. We’ve lost all forward propulsion.”

“Are you telling me we’re dead in the water?”

“Pretty much so Sir. We still have reverse, but that’s about it.”

Captain Hiro looked up. The city was behind them.

Decision made he called down the com tube, “Give me all that you’ve got!”

“Reverse Sir?”

“Full speed sailor!”

“Yes Sir!”

The flagship cruiser started backward

sluggishly at first as it was listing off to the one side heavily, but it soon picked up speed as it left a trail of acrid black smoke. The city was hard to see through all the smoke given off by the burning oil field that marked the grave site of the American battleship.

Captain Hiro called out, "Tell rear gunnery crews to cease all fire until I say otherwise. I want what available personnel not involved in damage control to start loading as much heavy explosive material as they can toward the rear of the ship."

A junior officer swallowed and said, "You intend to ram the city Sir?"

"Yes I do and I'm going to go right through there!" Captain Hiro said pointing at the oil slick fire where the battleship had been blown apart not so

many minutes before.

“The smoke will shield our approach and we will finish what our friends started. Now see that my orders are carried through!”

“Yes Sir!”

The young officer said saluting before he ran off to accomplish his Captain's orders.

Captain Hiro made his way to the woman, who had never stopped praying.

I looked up at the Captain's approach. In broken English the Captain said, “I'm sorry. The island perhaps would have been safer.”

I shook my head no and reached out to squeeze his hand, “I wouldn't choose to

be anywhere else in the world right now. This is where I belong. Thank you for bringing me!”

Captain Hiro nodded and continued on. The woman had courage. She had faith too. This ship shouldn't still be in one piece much less under propulsion of any kind, but it was and the city was getting closer with every passing second.

Chapter Eighteen

Deceptive Drift

“The city is being destroyed!” Roared out one enraged pirate.

“Aye pipe it down.” Captain Sally said calmly.

The other pirates in the control room turned cat eyes to her in incomprehension as to her lack of concern as to the state of their coveted city that they had waited so long in order to recover from the waves that had sheltered it.

“What! You doubt my leadership?”

Was not I the one who came up with the idea of the scroll and thus the means by which we preserved ourselves? Did I not submerge the city so that it would still be here for us? Cities can be rebuilt and our numbers can be increased, but what is happening right now is priceless! Do you not see it? You accursed idiots look! The forces of this sunken world are impaling themselves on our energy bolts. In a few more minutes time we will rule here uncontested!”

“What of the Sea People? They have strong faith in the Creator and they’ve stood in our way before!”

“Hah! What Sea People! Do you see them out there dying? They’ve sent others to die in their place. We’ll deal with them when the time comes, but for

now my brethren let's finish what's left of these pathetic humans who dare to oppose our will!"

The scene beyond the burning remnants of the city was a grim one. Both navies were almost gone and those not sunk were largely devoid of the availability to fire upon the city anymore.

The remaining battleship in the sea of conflict had managed to find a blind spot where the remaining towers could not get a clear shot at it. It had halted all forward progress as it pounded away unmercifully at the city.

Captain Sally gritted her teeth savagely as she felt the city shake beneath her at the impact of the sixteen inch shells. The truth was that the damage to the city was astronomical

considering the antiquated technology that they had been attacked with, but the enemy fleets had pressed the attack courageously and the continued shelling was beginning to pay off.

Several systems were malfunctioning. Normally she could have rotated the city to take out the battleship located in its safe haven out of range of the remaining towers, but side propulsion was off-line.

She'd have to initiate forward primary propulsion, which meant disengaging the mooring anchors that held the city in place. She hadn't wanted to do that because it meant the city would be free to drift upon the open water, but the battleship had to be taken out!

She engaged forward propulsion and warning indicators lit up everywhere. Pirates throughout the room lifted their

heads in consternation as the screens came alive with red data lines.

The pirate who'd doubted her before turned on Captain Sally savagely and bellowed out, "It's the Sea People! I told you they were a danger! They've undermined the city and fried our propulsion units with their lasers!"

"Shut up! What exactly have they done? Are they cutting holes and sinking the city?"

Another of the possessed crew spoke up, "No, they've focused on rendering us without navigational power and they've destroyed the underwater mooring system. The city can't be re-submerged! They've cut all the mooring lines but one. They mean to cast us adrift!"

"Why? What purpose would that serve?" Captain Sally bellowed out in

question, but she spied her answer when she glanced out a side window of the control room. There beyond the drifting smoke of war was the beginning evidence of what the Sea People had been about from the start.

An electric storm was fast approaching. The city adrift and without navigational power would be broken up into pieces by such a storm.

The city had to remain moored or there was no chance of survival, as the Sea People had seen to it that the city could not re-submerge beneath the safety of the waves.

In frantic alarm Captain Sally turned back to the others and screeched out, "Heat up the water at the last mooring junction! Fry their lungs out! We must stop them from cutting that last mooring

cable!”

Power was redirected to the one corner of the city still moored and dumped into the seawater in an electric fury that soon caused the seawater to boil intensely. The Sea People hard at work with their one technological attainment being the lasers that they had fashioned out of focalized crystals were pushed back by the suddenly scalding water.

The pirates were on to them. Some tried to push through the hot water to finish the job of severing the last mooring cable, but the water was too hot and several perished as their lungs were overcome by the heat of the water that they breathed.

They had no other option but to pull back and help their brethren, who were

busy rescuing as many of the sailors in the water as they could.

“They’re pulling back! It worked!” Said one pirate looking up from his screen and Captain Sally’s new controlling spirit knew a moment of savage joy.

The city would go on! Their manifest destiny was not over yet!

Laughing with fiendish joy she saw that the city had pivoted enough on its last mooring cable to put the still firing battleship within range of the surviving towers. She pivoted the attention of all of the towers onto the battleship and awaited in anticipation of watching its destruction.

“Look!!!”

Distracted by the shout of alarm Captain Sally glanced off from her

intended focus of destruction. Her eyes found the new threat almost instantly as it surged toward the city out of the burning oil slick of the first battleship's watery grave site.

“Switch all fire to that ship! Now!!!” She rang out in hellish desperation.

“We can't! It's out of range of the remaining towers!”

“What???” Captain Sally burst out with and then in dawning comprehension she realized that the slight drift of the city on its remaining mooring cable that had brought the battleship back into range had just made the approaching cruiser out of range.

In sickening horror she watched as the smoking cruiser that shouldn't even be floating given how much damage it had taken, plow into the corner of the city

where the last mooring line was located.

All of the pirates were knocked from off their feet as the cruiser exploded magnificently. The screens within the room went dark and all firing from the city's towers ceased.

The pirates had but made it back up to their feet, when they were jerked flat on their backs again. The city was adrift and moving quickly as it was ferried along by some unknown source.

Captain Sally raised up to see that the city was but half its former size as the cruiser had split a large part of it off with its explosion. Looking back she could see that the cruiser and several parts of the city were already submerging beneath the waves. Looking forward she got a glimpse of the backs of several powerful underwater beasts.

They were the Sea People's dragons and they were dragging the city directly towards the fast approaching storm that ran the length of the horizon.

Moans of despair erupted around the control room as the realization that their long escape from the prison of the Deep was about to come full circle. There was no escaping from it this time by sealing themselves into an object of dark inspired thought.

The moans turned to wails as the storm picked the city up on a wave ridge only to drop it in the next moment into a deep trough. The city broke up under the weight of the downward crashing waves and sank forever into the deep.

Chapter Nineteen

Ministry Begun

I felt my grip on Captain Hiro slacking and I forced myself to grip harder as I tugged the injured Captain along behind me. Suddenly I was beside something solid and then there were hands pulling the Captain from the water and then me.

In a sort of dazed awareness I felt hands pressing me up a ladder of some sort. Then against all odds I found myself in Colt's arms and I latched on with everything I had left in me.

Could this really be true or was it a

dream?

I looked up to see that it really was him. Suddenly there was a jolt that threatened the integrity of my stomach's constitution and then the feeling of increasing movement.

Dazed I asked, "What's going on?"

"We're trying to outrun the storm and reach the shelter of the island. You were among the last survivors that we found. Thank God!"

I buried my face back against his chest and just held onto him. With time I gradually became aware of my surroundings. I was on the deck of the surviving battleship and all around me lay the bodies of injured and dying sailors.

"How many ships made it?" I asked in anguish of spirit.

“This is the only one left.”

I closed my eyes as tears pressed out of them. So many had died and yet because of their brave actions so many more were going to keep on living. Victory always comes at a cost, but it had been an especially dear one today.

The storm, as all the storms seemed to be in this sunken realm, was particularly vicious. Fearing for the integrity of the ship even within the confines of the harbor the American Captain took no chances, but beached the battleship deeply into the shoreline of the harbor.

Despite the tempest that was already beginning to blow the native islanders rushed forward to offload the injured sailors from off the top side decks and carry them to their homes sheltered from the storm within the rocks of the island.

No more lives were lost as everyone worked together putting aside old hatreds to help those who needed it most, as the lives of all were worth saving.

The day was calm the storm having passed by several hours before. It had been a relief to hear the howling winds dissipate and see the orange glow come back to the clouds. I still couldn't really believe that everything had happened as it had.

There was no report of the city, other than it had been destroyed in the storm.

It had been a welcome surprise to learn from the Sea People that even more survivors than what the battleship

had managed to pick up had survived the storm from beneath the waves.

It was clear to me that my brother had no intentions of ever leaving his sea bride or the responsibilities of his new position as a Prince of the Undersea Realm.

I had no intentions of ever leaving my Prince either. I glanced up smiling at Colt who walked beside me and he in return smiled at me as we continued to walk hand-in-hand along the beach.

He pointed out to sea and glancing out to where he pointed I saw the tail section of a plane sticking up out of the waves.

The plane's number was still visible on the tail section and with a start I recognized the number as belonging to the plane that both I and Colt had gone

down in. I glanced uncertainly to Colt and he nodded in confirmation that it truly was the plane.

We continued on along the beach, which is when I saw some debris washed up on the shore. Colt headed for the debris piles, but I held back as I really didn't want to discover anybody's half rotted corpse. I had already seen far too many.

I watched Colt foraging for a moment and then out of curiosity I asked, "Nothing over there is going to make me heave my breakfast up is there?"

He gestured me on and so I came up to discover what had him so engrossed. He was tearing saturated cardboard away from the inner contents of a box that looked to be packed in plastic. Now this was exciting!

I waited as Colt pulled the plastic apart to then reach inside. He pulled out a Bible that showed no water damage whatsoever. He handed it to me and then continued digging into the bag.

My hands framed around the Bible they held. It was a missionary's Bible. I glanced up from the Bible in my hands and took in the sight of the natives and sailors moving about on the island all around us.

I had the strongest feeling course through me at that moment. The message I'd received was undeniable. I had been called to share the gospel with these people.

I knew so little from which to do so though. It had been so long since I'd even read the Bible. Surely God couldn't really be calling me to this

ministry?

My spirit said otherwise and I made the decision to obey the calling on my life that I had received. Tingles shot throughout me as I made that life-affirming decision to be obedient and faithful to do that which I had been given to do.

That God would use me of all people to reach the lost!

It was both a miracle and the most humbling of honors. I wiped a tear away and saw that Colt was looking up at me strangely.

“Are there more Bibles?” I asked.

“Yup, a whole bunch of them plus some study guides.”

I nodded and then asked, “Colt you are my husband and as my headship do I have your permission and blessing to

share the word of God with the people of this inner world?”

He glanced down and then back up, “I’m not going to stand in your way honey. Do whatever you feel led to do and I’ll support you. I’d like to start over with God myself.”

I smiled down at him radiantly as eagerness filled me at the prospect of starting this new journey into faith with my husband by my side. He was the best mate ever!

“Will you stow this stuff away from the seawater for me please?”

He nodded quickly and I left him to walk off a ways to sit down with my back to a tree as I began to read the Bible once again. It was a life-affirming experience because as I read the Word it seemed to read into me in a way that I

had never experienced before much less welcomed as I did now.

Time passed by, I'm not sure how much time, but I glanced up to see Colt standing there with a serious expression on his face. I closed the Bible in my lap and set it to the side as he handed me an unopened salt encrusted box.

I took it and read the address that was still legible. It was addressed to my parents!

Slowly I turned the box about in search of a return address. I found it.

This was the box filled with the damning evidence of my past sins! It had been on the same plane that I had been on in route to beg my parents for forgiveness.

They had never received it!

The box fell from my fingers and I

leaped up to my feet screaming with a joy that was inexpressible. Colt continued my jump upwards towards the heavens by grasping my waist and lobbying me upward further. My eyes closed and in my heart of hearts I cried out brokenly to my Creator, "Thank you!"

Colt caught me as I fell back to Earth and I opened my teary eyes to behold him face-to-face. In a way I still couldn't believe it.

Overcome with emotion I said, "They never got it!"

His face was one big smile and incredibly I watched as his eyes grew moist as he stared into mine.

In a husky voice he said, "I'm so happy for you!"

I kissed him with all the passion that I

felt for him, but surprisingly he broke it off after only a short moment.

In surprise I looked at him only to hear him ask, “Want to have a bonfire?”

“Yes!!!”

I watched the box burn brightly along with its contents on the fire made from dried palm branches. I pressed back against Colt lovingly in whose strong arms I rested.

I was so blessed, but especially with the man I was blessed to share the rest of my life with. He hadn't even asked to see what was inside the box. I'd have let him look, but it meant more to me to know that he preferred the woman that I was now to what I had once been.

I wanted to bless him for being so caring and I smiled as an idea came to mind. He'd have to wait for a little while though as our bonfire had attracted attention.

I left Colt's arms with Bible in hand and went to the center of a natural seating area and waited as Islanders and sailors from both sides of a war that was finally over sat down around me as if drawn by a force that none could see. I saw Captain Hiro make his way down to sit in the sand moments later to be joined by the old chief of the village.

The headman of the village looked around and said, "My people, in my heart I sense the need for change. I believe she is the change I've waited for in expectation. Listen and may we learn together as to what she will teach us."

Captain Hiro nodded and added, “Likewise. Listen men. This woman’s faith is strong. It is good to listen to what she has to say.”

I looked at the suddenly crowded throng gathered all around me that stared at me expectantly as if I was a messenger from heaven. I swallowed away the last of my reservations in a desperate unspoken prayer for help before I began to speak, “I am but a woman. A woman redeemed by grace. A redemptive grace unearned by anything that I’ve ever done or could do in this life to merit such redeeming favor from my Creator. I want to share with you by opening the words of this book that was written by the hand of God, the life saving knowledge of the Savior who came and lived as a man and was

sacrificed for all of us who have fallen deeply into sin. It is not I that will teach you, but rather it is the Spirit of the living God ministering through me to you so that you might know the truth and by acknowledging that truth be set free by the redeeming blood of Jesus.”

I had their attention. I opened the Bible before me and let the Holy Spirit continue to put the words needed to be said onto my lips as I had no great private knowledge or mastery of the Bible with which to speak sermons. I had but the will to serve and that was enough.

At one point I glanced up to see Colt leaning against a tree in the background. He gave me a big thumbs-up and after briefly smiling I refocused on what the Spirit of God had to say even as I

marveled at the change in me.

Colt was confused. He'd listened for hours to Kim translate the Bible into her native Polynesian tongue. Thankfully he'd stood next to an American sailor who had interpreted everything she'd said for him.

Her teaching from the word of God had reawakened memories of his childhood. Good memories. He had listened raptly for hours on end and felt the beginning of a rebirth of his own immortal soul.

It was incredible to him to come to the realization that he really could be forgiven for the unjust things he'd done in his past. The innocent lives that he'd

taken in time of war and the wasted barren that he had made of his life after the war that had scarred his soul and made him hard.

There was hope for the future, but right now he relished the prospect of spending the present with the person that he loved the most upon the world of God's creation. The only problem was that she had somehow disappeared on him.

He'd seen her whisper something to the old chief, who'd gotten a big grin on his face and nodded. Kim had straightened and upon spotting him in the crowd had given him a big wink. Then she had disappeared.

He heard a low whistle and looking off to the side he saw the old headman gesture to him from an isolated part of

the forest. Out of curiosity Colt drew near to the old man wondering what he was up to.

The old man didn't waste time on words but instead pushed Colt into a depression in the forest that revealed itself to be a small clearing that was brightly lit by several fires. There was no one there besides him and the old man.

The headman tugged strongly on his shoulders and Colt sat down inelegantly on the ground of the clearing that was covered with colorfully woven blankets. The old man cackled as he said something and then slapped Colt hard on the back before he left the clearing.

Colt looked around completely at a loss as to what was going on.

I glanced through the palm fronds at my man. He looked like a lost puppy unsure of his surroundings and my heart squeezed tenderly at the sight of it.

I could do this. I could do anything for this man, but what I was about to do was out of the comfort zone for me.

I remembered my past and what I had freely given away of myself in front of photographers and rolling cameras. Resolve firmed within me to wash away what had been, with what was now.

I was going to bless my husband. He deserved it just as he deserved all of me and whatever creative potential I possessed. I snapped my fingers sharply as I stepped forward into the clearing and the invisible drummers out of sight

of the hidden clearing began their heavy tempo drum beats.

As the drumbeats rolled so did my hips in an ancient rhythm that I had learned as a girl from watching my mother dance. My hands lifted above my head as I moved in the dance that I seemed to remember without conscious recollection of any kind.

The tempo increased and my hips moved faster. As I sinuously shook in time to the beat I let my eyes raise coyly to take in Colt. He was staring at me completely enraptured and I felt something unleash inside of me at the knowledge of how well I had seduced my husband.

He deserved everything I could give or flaunt of my body, which was now just for his enjoyment. He'd not looked

at the native girls out of respect for me, but he looked at me now with a hunger that was real and thrilling to behold.

I crooked a finger at him beckoningly as my hips continued to shake rhythmically and he rose to his feet and took a hesitant step toward me. The look on his face clearly said that he was experiencing one of the best moments of his life, which only empowered me to please him more.

I closed the distance to him twirling softly as my bare feet made their way across the woven rugs to him. At last I was before him and looking up into his eyes I lifted the flower lei necklace from around my neck, which was my only covering and placed it around his neck.

In a coquettish manner I asked, "You like your island girl?"

“I like!” He said gutturally and I grinned broadly at the sight of how overwhelmed he was by me.

His hands stilled the beat of my hips and my arms closed around his neck even as our lips melded together in a kiss that was unlike any other. The drums continued on providing a fitting tempo for the rapid beats of our hearts.

I had a calling on my life from God and a man who knew my sins, but held me now as if I was beyond precious. I was beyond blessed of all women to be standing here as I now was. My cup truly was running over with goodwill pressed down from above by a Creator who'd never forgotten me even when I'd fallen so far from His will during my life. To God be the glory for He is worthy of all honor and praise!

Chapter Twenty

The Deep

Beneath the waves at the border of the Sea People's realm of Undersea

Loranni anxiously stared into the deeper water that lay before her. It had been too long. Too long since she had seen the man she had come to love in so short a time.

Just before her lay a vast gulf of uncharted depths that some said fell all the way to the center of the earth. Loranni did not know if that was true as no Sea Person had ever gone there, until

now.

Into the depths of the ocean trench is where the city of the evil ones had fallen and to make sure of its complete destruction her father and many others had ventured down into the darkness. That was not the only reason they went in search of the city. Their loyal dragons, who had towed the city here, had not been heard from since the storm.

The expedition should have returned by now. It was dangerous to spend too much time in the deeper depths of the sea.

They should have been back by now!

Loranni twisted away from the precipice of darkness. Her face seized up in the emotion that she felt.

“Loranni.”

She spun around to see her lover

followed by only a few others slowly make their way up over the edge and back into the well lit shallower depths of the realm of Undersea.

“Koke! You’re hurt!” She exclaimed in alarm as she went to him.

Pulling back she looked deeply into her mate’s eyes and asked the question she dreaded to hear the answer to, “Where is my father?”

Koke stared back at her the look of sorrow in his eyes answer enough as to the fate of her father the King.

Koke looked past the handful of survivors behind him to the abyss of darkness beyond. His words registered into Loranni’s consciousness with awful import.

“The dragons..... They were pulled down by the fallen ones. They

tried to escape, but there were too many of the enemy.”

“Koke? Do you speak of the pirates?”

Koke’s eyes turned back to her and she shivered at the look of angst she saw within his eyes. It was as if he had looked upon hell itself.

“The pirates are but a few of many Loranni. There are many more. One day Loranni I fear that they will be back for even now they move about freely as if released from their chains. They are just down there in the darkness waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Loranni asked feeling chilled despite the warmth of the water around her.

Koke stared into her eyes deeply and spoke with authority, “The end of the world.”

Koke moved away from the edge,

“Come let us be gone from here.”

Loranni hesitated, “What is to be done though Koke?”

Koke stopped and his shoulders hunched forward as if under a great weight. After a moment of silence she received her answer, “I don’t know, but I think we should pray.”

Loranni’s hand slipped into Koke’s and together the King and Queen of Undersea prayed and for a moment the hopes of all the Sea People, who were gathered about watching, were uplifted, but the future remained uncertain to all of them.

Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country. It's the best place to be
I'm
thinking. I share my life with my beautiful wife,
Mary,

my three children and one cat named Herman.

When I'm not lost in a daydream the most
likely

place you'll find me at is flower gardening
or at the movie theatre. I use to think I was
strong, but

now I freely admit that I'm weak. My new
reality is

okay because Jesus Christ has me covered.

It's better that way trust me!

